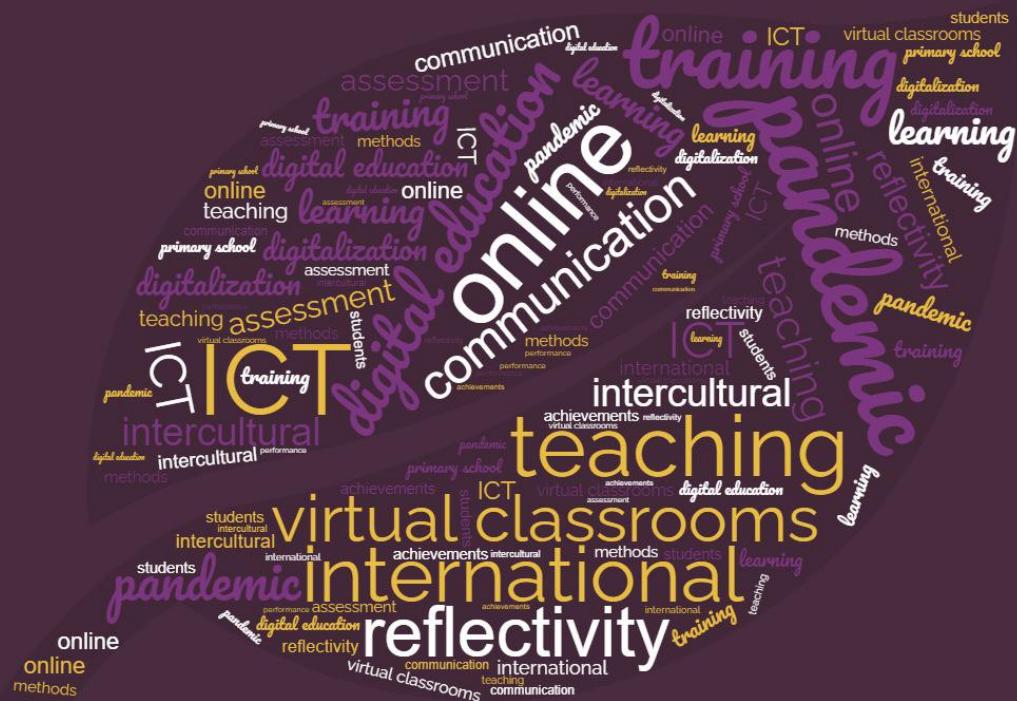


# CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS

# Atalia Onițiu

## Editor / Coordinator



# **CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS OF LEARNING AND TEACHING IN VIRTUAL CLASSROOMS**

**Atalia Onițiu**  
Editor / Coordinator

**PRESA UNIVERSITARĂ CLUJEANĂ**  
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# FOREWORD

**ATALIA ONIȚIU**

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The International Conference “*Challenges and Benefits of Learning and Teaching in Virtual Classrooms*” was organized on June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2023, by the Departments of Sociology and Educational Sciences from the Faculty of Sociology and Psychology, West University of Timisoara, Romania.

The aim of the Conference was to reunite scholars, teachers, and researchers from Romania and abroad, in an international debate context, where results of unpublished research in virtual, online, and digital education, were presented and discussed. The Conference also constituted the main multiplier event of the collaborative project “*Bringing Real Life into Virtual Classrooms*” (SEE 21-COP-0004), organized under the auspices of the EEA Grants 2014-2021, between the West University of Timisoara, Romania, and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology ([www.VRclassrooms.uvt.ro](http://www.VRclassrooms.uvt.ro)), whose main goal is to develop innovative practical solutions for learning in virtual classrooms.

The Scientific Committee of the Conference was represented by: Dr. Atalia Onițiu, Dr. Melinda Dincă, Dr. Mariana Crașovan and Dr. Daniel Lucheș (from the West University of Timisoara), Dr. Martin Thomassen, and Dr. Trond Berge (from the Norwegian University of Science and Technology).

The Conference was organized in a hybrid form, to offer participants who could not travel to Timisoara the possibility to present their contributions.

The Conference organizers were honored to welcome four prestigious keynote speakers: Adrian Hatos (sociologist, full professor at the University of Oradea, Romania and PhD coordinator at the University of Debrecen, Hungary, specialized in the field of advanced quantitative methods (University of Michigan; Utrecht University), public administration (Maastricht University), urban restructuring (CEU Budapest), and transitology (Budapest Academy of Economic Sciences, King's College London and

University of Cracow), author of more than 100 publications (books, studies and articles) that address social research interests, such as: education, social movements, collective action and protests, the digitalization of education); Jens Røyrvik (Associate Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, specialized in the anthropology of technology, with a philosophical anchoring in Heidegger's investigation of technology, Marx's machine theory, Johansen's determination of the border and Larsen's investigation of entification as a phenomenon); Gabriela Grosseck (Associate Professor in the Department of Psychology at the West University of Timisoara, with particular expertise in ICT in education (teaching, learning and researching), a solid experience in students'/teachers' training in both f2f and online environments, author of many articles in the field of e-learning 2.0, speaker at different international events, workshop organizer and member of editorial committees (journals and conferences) and last, but not least, Håkon Fyhn (social anthropologist, Associate Professor at the Department of Social Anthropology, Norwegian University of Science and Technology, interested in robotization and digitization, presence over distance, collaborative processes in working life, and control rooms operators in space).

Their lectures on *The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Lessons for Education* (Adrian Hatos), *The University Machine* (Jens Røyrvik), *Transforming Assessment Practices* (Gabriela Grosseck) and *Collaboration across Distance - Theoretical and Practical issues* (Håkon Fyhn) constituted a preamble of the Conference papers.

During the day of the Conference, 36 papers addressing heterogeneous topics, from the experience of teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic, to the use of ICT in teaching, the development of digital skills of students, digital education, online teaching and learning, or virtual classrooms were presented. The abstracts are available for consultation online, on the project site (<https://vrclassrooms.uvt.ro/HTML/international.html>).

156 researchers, teachers and scholars from Romania, Nigeria, Spain, Indonesia, Germany, Italy, India, North Macedonia, Mexico, Bangladesh, Austria, Egypt and Poland participated to this one day event, some of them from the halls of the Western University in Timisoara, others connected remotely, with the help of the Google Meet application, in a fruitful exchange of ideas and good practices regarding teaching, learning and evaluation in the online environment.

Papers were structured, as one can see from the program (available online at <https://vrclassrooms.uvt.ro/HTML/international.html>), in three sections: Teaching, learning and evaluating in virtual classrooms; Benefits of digital skills, computer based learning and VR design for learning and training in adult education and Online teaching and learning experiences from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Foreword

The present volume reunites some of the contributions presented during the Conference day, submitted by the authors and accepted after the peer-review process and will be open for access on the project site (<https://vrclassrooms.uvt.ro/HTML/international.html>).

# THE INTERNATIONAL REFLECTIVE TEAM AS A TOOL FOR CO-DESIGNING AND CO-ASSESSING ONLINE INTERNATIONAL COURSES FOR VIRTUAL AND BLENDED MOBILITIES

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**ABSTRACT:** One of the main features that distinguish the work of an alliance is the permanent establishment of cooperation relationships among institutions from different countries. Cooperation inside an alliance, specifically the UNITA Universitas Montium consortium, means the ability to work and find common teaching and learning strategies with teachers from different higher education institutions around Europe. Since we are talking of faculty members working in different universities and countries, the virtual aspect of cooperation becomes crucial. There are many ways of cooperating among partner universities, and one of those is the promotion of students' mobility. In this regard, UNITA invested considerable resources in different mobility opportunities; some of those are virtual and blended ones. These exchange programs represent valuable chances for students to take an active part in the learning path of a foreign partner university, even if they do not have the physical chance to concretely move from a country to another at all or for a long period of time. The benefits pointed out with these programs are not only related to students. They can represent an opportunity as well for faculty to enhance their teaching skills by promoting personalized courses for exchange students, starting from the backgrounds undergraduates from different countries have experienced.

Virtual and blended mobilities erogated by an alliance, moreover, have some peculiarities since they should provide shared and connected teaching and learning programs in strict cooperation with faculty from all the partner institutions to promote the building of an international virtual campus. This is one of the main features of the Collaborative Online

International Learning approach (COIL) which specifically deals with the promotion of learning in an international and virtual environment. In this case, teachers are asked to work together in all the learning phases to make this aim happen. For this reason, in this contribution we want to present the International Reflective Team method (IRT) as a tool faculty can take advantage of to discuss, with colleagues of different UNITA institutions, facilities and strategies to build up ad hoc courses for international students, from the didactics part until the assessment, starting from their own experience in the countries students come from. Starting from the evidences of the efficiency of this method, mainly applied to set up discussions among teachers from different field on a specific problem and consequently deliver a shared solution, we want to propose the application of IRT as a strategy to help teachers of UNITA in the co-designing and co-assessing process inside online courses specifically conceived for virtual mobilities of the alliance, to give UNITA students the opportunity to really feel part of an international community by the participation to exchange programs and courses internationally recognized.

## **Introduction**

The paper aims at introducing the International Reflective Team approach as a tool to promote the establishment and dissemination of international cooperation programs, in a reflective way, inside a European university alliance. As we can state from the name, indeed, one of the main features of an alliance is represented by the promotion and implementation of joint programs, pedagogical identity, and research approaches among different countries. This procedure requires many steps and challenges deriving from the necessity of finding points of contact among institutions with diverse political guidelines and rules. To reach this goal, it is fundamental to focus on ongoing reflection and confrontation with people who are directly involved in the projects but also and especially with external and less directly affected members of the alliance, who can provide different point of views and consequently give an added value to the quality of the offered programs within the consortium. The International Reflective Team, as we promote in this research proposal, can represent a reliable strategy to foster this ongoing and shared feedback.

## **Unita Universitas Montium**

The context in which we would like to implement our research proposal is the UNITA Universitas Montium alliance (UNITA, 2020). It is part of the European University Initiative program (European Council, 2017), which promoted the establishment of European alliances among different universities in order to enlarge the cooperation of the countries belonging to the European Union and spread the achievement of a common

European identity and citizenship. Specifically, UNITA, which counts 12 university partners, aims at creating an international virtual campus that promotes learning innovation and in which all the members can freely move and take advantage of the same pedagogical identity and principles. This implies the creation of cooperation programs in which faculty and students from different universities work together on the same project. The main initiatives that UNITA is currently promoting are the COILs, Collaborative Online International Learning (Levin, 1995; Verdejo, 1996; Henri & Rigault, 1996), BIPs, Blended Intensive Programs, and virtual mobilities. All the three initiatives involve teachers from the universities of the alliance who work on co-designing shared courses or modules for the students of the alliance, in presence and at a distance. Even if they belong to different backgrounds and realities, faculty and students can benefit from the involvement of different partners of the alliance and consequently have the chance to interact with colleagues with different backgrounds and experiences.

## **The International Reflective Team (IRT)**

The method we are suggesting in this paper, that would help the promotion of effective and reliable cooperation programs within the alliance, is called International Reflective Team. We are talking about a method which started to exist with the name of Reflective Team (Andersen, 1987), initially used in the psychological context to promote meta-dialogue inside the clinical work, and then implemented in the educational environment as well, especially to foster discussions and confrontations among teachers, starting from a practical issue stated by a specific fellow.

In this regard, Schön (1987) in his book stated how this method, that he describes as reflection-in-action, fosters teachers in pursuing continued learning and helps them to develop soft skills as problem solving and critical thinking, crucial competences to become an expert professional which promotes effective learning in students to let them consequently be able handling and solving complex problems during their study path and their everyday life. This reflectivity skill can be enhanced by constant exchanging with peers, since it can bring out more self-awareness and different points of view, thanks to the different experiences and backgrounds of the colleagues (Brookfield, 2017). Many instances of its efficacy have been stated as well by Ryan (2015), who promotes different strategies of its implementation in different study domains, with the same purpose, by pointing out how the reflection can be fostered in different modes depending on the disciplines involved and the stage of the program analyzed.

The inclusion of the term *international*, in addition, enhances the chances of its implementation, since it allows the people involved to work together also remotely. The main phases which define this method are the following: it starts with the explanation of the issue by the advice seeker who, after giving as much details as possible, moves temporarily away from the group that will start to discuss and reflect upon the problem, trying to find new possible strategies that the advice seeker, who does not take part to the discussion but can hear everything, will try to implement in his future work. At the end of the debate, he can go back to the group, he shares the notes and reflections he took with the colleagues, and they finally write down together the guidelines he will follow to try to fix his didactical problem.

This practice, specifically, has been presented in a conference on Faculty Development in Genoa, Italy (Unige Teaching and Learning Center, 2023), by Professor Hansen from the Goethe University of Frankfurt, who promoted a workshop to let the participants practically experience how this method works and the potential benefits it could give to their professional career. Her intervention came from an already existing project carried out by the Goethe University of Frankfurt, which implemented the Reflective Team Method internationally, so from here comes the word “International”, by involving faculty from different universities of different countries in Europe. The discussions were clearly held online or in a hybrid mode (the faculty team from the same institution in person and the foreign colleagues online), to solve specific issues brought out by the colleagues regarding their teaching experience. This innovative approach has been positively embraced by the participants involved, who expressed, in addition to the already mentioned advantages given by the Reflective Team method itself, the added value felt by using this system in an international environment: first of all, it gave them the chance to concretely come in contact with not well-known colleagues, due to distance issues, and to develop an expanded self-awareness of their teaching practices and techniques, thanks to the different backgrounds that can be shared only by people that daily experience different strategies and different academic contexts (Hansen, 2023).

## **The IRT to Promote the Implementation of Cooperation Programs within the Alliance**

Considering the many advantages of this pedagogical approach, especially related to the promotion of reflexivity and cooperation among people from different research backgrounds, we propose its implementation in the international context of UNITA, to

foster the establishment of new cooperation programs as COILs, BIPs and virtual mobilities and/or to spread the already existing ones to a larger amount of the consortium members. As stated before, these initiatives already exist within the alliance, but the IRT can help to enhance and create new cooperation from the very beginning through the co-designing until the co-assessment of already existing partnerships. In this way, it is possible to involve not only people taking part in the program, but also external partners of the alliance who can give different feedback and enhance the quality of existing and future programs. Moreover, the more these programs are disseminated and implemented within the alliance, the more we can work on the definition of a shared pedagogical and didactical identity of UNITA, giving faculty and students the chance to benefit from same teaching and learning approaches, wherever they decide to study inside the alliance.

Here is a proposal on how an International Reflective Team can be established and conducted within the alliance, to promote the introduction of a COIL program. A group of representative teachers from different universities of UNITA starts cooperating to promote an interdisciplinary COIL within the consortium. After the definition of each step of the program, the IRT can be implemented in two ways: in the first one, the reflective team is provided to assess the proposed program before its start; the second strategy aims at evaluating the program after its first phase of implementation, to point out which aspects worked, and which are in still need of revision. In both scenarios, the discussion team can be formed not only by faculty, but also with the active involvement of students who are the direct recipients and participants of the program and can give a crucial contribution from their point of view. In both cases, it is important to include members that did not take part in the program directly, nor in the definition process, nor in the implementation stage. After the creation of the team, one representative with the role of speaker, presents the designed COIL to the group, by focusing on some issues that came out during the definition of the project or during the application, depending on which way has been chosen to employ the IRT method. After that, as we explained above, the team reunites to discuss the question and to propose a shared solution starting from the different experiences of the participants. That way, new potential partners, matching by field similarity, research interest or other criteria, can be made aware of the existence of the cooperation program, and it consequently helps to make the alliance more and more rich of active and involved participants, starting from a constant reflection of existent or new practices.

## Conclusions

UNITA alliance, even if it is entering in its second phase, still needs to expand and to share its initiatives within the members. The implementation of the IRT, in this concern, can help to introduce and mix people with different level of involvement in the cooperation programs offered by the consortium, to start new projects and to enhance the quality of the existing ones, thanks to the constant reflection, exchange and confrontations promoted by this approach. Nevertheless, some possible challenges have been identified, starting from classical issues derived from the remote working like internet connection and people involvement, until the further step that we need to consider when we try to implement international programs: each institution, indeed, has its own policies and laws to refer to, that need to be well known and considered in order to not collide with everyone needs and features. Moreover, people who are not used to cooperating in a reflexive way can face some challenges and resistances at the beginning. For all the issues stated, we propose to always start with the involvement of a limited group of people, who already had experiences with the approach, cooperations and remote working with colleagues, to take advantage of them to spread the benefits and good practices IRT can bring to the community. Additionally, an initial benchmarking focused on pointing out the main features of each partner's university policies can help to have a complete overview of the boundaries to be respected and then to concentrate on the common features from which new partnership' projects can arise.

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# TEACHING-LEARNING DURING COVID TIMES: SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM INDIA

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**ABSTRACT:** Classrooms have always been a space for engagement, critical thinking, socialization, and a powerhouse of emerging collective consciousness. During Covid 19 pandemic, after institutions started working in online mode, these spaces became abstract, alienated, and non-engaging. 'Can you hear me?', 'Am I audible?' became ways to ensure our connection with the students. Many of the students did not have the luxury of being in separate rooms with separate devices. In India, having your own rooms and own spaces is a luxury as many of the students stay in one or two roomed houses. On one hand the online mode opened the possibility of connecting with other teachers/social thinkers across the globe for guest lectures and knowledge sharing and on the other the students started being enclosed in their own spaces. The 'collective' was in crisis. This paper would like to discuss these experiences from the perspectives of teachers and students in India to understand the power dynamics, challenges, and possibilities of virtual classrooms.

## **Introduction. Contextualizing the Space**

Classrooms have always been a vibrant space of exchange, not just in ideas and knowledge, but also of culture, communication, collaboration. It is a collective experience. In India, the classrooms are the spaces of diversity and acculturation, especially the institution I am involved in teaching for the last six years. It accommodates students across the globe which makes it a learning experience in itself.

On 22nd March 2020, the lockdown in India started taking us to a time of fear and uncertainty. As teachers it took us some time to train ourselves well to move from the chalk and talk method of teaching-learning towards the online mode of communication. The institutional infrastructure was robust, which trained the teachers of different age groups to adapt with the changing crisis. There were synchronous and asynchronous class hours to facilitate both teachers and students and their 'screen time'. However, this new mode of engagement brought various experiences, which will be discussed in the

following paper. This is primarily an individual's perspective, but I believe the personal ceases to be one's own in this situation which becomes a larger issue to be looked at. These are larger issues in respect to the teaching-learning process of a higher educational institution.

The Online mode of interaction in education was nothing new. It had already started with different academicians and activists joining us for guest lectures online during classes, seminars, and conferences. This transition of 'space' for teachers and students was however very unsettling, as the teaching process does not only involve transferring information to the 'others' but continuous class discussions and deliberations. Most of the teachers in their best possible way tried to replicate these practices online as well. There came a challenge of student engagement. The students who would put their hands up to answer a question or someone who would ask critical questions to teachers to think more, now did not unmute. The cameras were mostly switched off. This then became the space of a screen with different names in front of a teacher with less engaged students. The engagement online possibly is a bit different. The usual questions and answers sessions do not work much in these online spaces, rather break out rooms of small groups, online white board activities and quizzes became the techniques of engagement.

This paper is a humble attempt to reflect, think and analyze some of these aspects from a sociological lens. Sociology as a discipline is not just academic, but a continuous practice in our existence. It makes us look at things beyond the 'normal' and this 'new normal' becomes an emerging concern for most of the practitioners. The questions which started to occur are: Is this a sustainable method of educational engagement? What could be the various effects of these 'virtual' classrooms on the holistic development of the students? How can we make this process more humane and empathetic, going beyond the screen and virtual space? This paper would like to discuss these experiences from the perspectives of teachers and students in India, to understand the power dynamics, challenges, and possibilities of virtual classrooms.

## **Online Pedagogy: Unlearning and Relearning**

The online teaching pedagogy had to change in this new crisis. The tools, resources, course materials used in physical classrooms now needed a creative and technological transformation. It has to be relevant to its times clubbed with readiness and sensitivity. It was no longer the content of the delivery per se, but also about delivering it with a highly sensitive approach. This brought about the process of unlearning and relearning on the

part of the faculty members. Most of the teachers are teaching in their own ways till now, but moving into online spaces crunched their possibilities of engagement into a more structured form. An unlearning of the taken for granted pedagogies now needed a quick swift towards the new technological engagements.

The students whose emotions could not be viewed instantly during the teaching process needs to be continuously considered while designing the class lectures, presentations, or discussions without compromising on the criticality of the online teaching process (Robinson et al., 2020). A lot of students were going through an emotional turmoil due to the pandemic, and thus teaching courses like social problems, sociology of health, gender studies and so on became a reflective process. In India domestic violence during Covid increased due to various reasons. In Bangalore, the police reported an increase of twenty-five calls from ten calls every day of domestic violence cases from the victims.

The idea of 'care', 'empathy' had to be our priority while teaching the students. In our institution we planned synchronous and asynchronous classes. In the morning two hours we had lecture sessions, whereas afternoon two hours were asynchronous, where the students were given reading materials and assignments to complete, related to the morning sessions. This was done with the objective of reducing the screen time of the students where they can use the second half of the day to either write or type their assignments. It was also difficult for a lot of students to have private spaces to attend the classes without disturbances. Most of the families had to share spaces with siblings, cousins, parents who also had to adjust the work from home schedule. The asynchronous assignments were also designed with the objective to 'care' about the mental health of the students whose concentration for online direct teaching went down during the Covid 19 times.

Teaching-learning is a reciprocal process, where the higher education institutes are now emphasizing collaborative learning pedagogy, rather than a teacher-led system of teaching. During the online course this kind of discussion-based learning became a challenge, as the students felt less encouraged to interact with each other, where the creative intervention of the faculty members was much needed. Some, who were well equipped with the technological know-how of instant quizzes, polls, etc., managed it much better than those who had to learn newer arenas to engage the young minds. Our institute also got different learning management software for its various official interactive sessions and classes. Coursera license was taken to upgrade both teachers and students through meaningful online courses. During Covid there was an increase in the number of online platforms with e-learning content available at ease to the students.

## New Classrooms. The Changing Space

The idea of changing space has always been of interest to sociologists. Habermas in his theorization was critical about the changing 'public sphere' due to the advent of new technologies and different communication mechanisms. He emphasized the power of exchanging ideas, debates, and discussions in the public sphere. The power of collectives is much larger than an aggregate of individuals. Similarly, we see educational institutes are a space of emerging ideas and innovations. This has only been possible due to the collective engagement of the students, not only within classrooms, but also very much beyond that. In our university we have a plethora of choices of extracurricular and cocurricular activities for students to engage in various activities of their interests.

Students socialize with each other; they engage in learning processes outside the classroom as much as inside. Online learning did not really create these spaces of engagement. The continuous affirmation of "can you hear me?", "am I audible?" is also because of the internet crisis that most of us faced while engaging in the classes even when we were privileged to be in an urban cosmopolitan city in India. Most of my students did not switch on their cameras and hardly talked with the objective to engage. However, initially their enthusiasm was much more compared to the later days of the pandemic as this situation continued till almost a year and a half.

Teachers had challenges in rapport building with the students as they usually do in physical classrooms. They feel that they are unable to observe "body language in class" and "their interaction with others". As a result, many teachers have cited that remote learning has made it more difficult to engage the students. The students also felt a feeling of alienation from their peer groups for obvious reasons. The new joinees hardly got any space to know each other and connect. The online ice breaking sessions or discussion forums were never as vibrant as the physical spaces.

Coming to the phase of online classes, it is indeed a privilege to have a 'space' to teach or to learn for that matter. In India, due to the structure of the families and the economic conditions of people it was a privilege to have our own rooms. 'Privacy' was not an easy availability here. During admission duty, proctoring and classes when students had to switch on their cameras, in many cases we could feel their discomfort. Many students were listening to the classes on their mobile phones while doing their household chores.

## Challenges and Possibilities of Online Teaching

In India, because of the infrastructural struggle in school and college education, the state/national level examinations in tenth and twelfth didn't happen and students scored average marks which also affected the selection and quality of students in colleges as well. India is a culturally rich and diverse country with 1.43 billion people as per records in 2023. I am mentioning this information here to point out that in India the diversity is huge, there is a large gap in infrastructure when it comes to the colleges in urban and rural spaces. The right to education, which is recognized as a human right in a number of international conventions including the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, that recognizes a right to free, compulsory, primary education for all, now starts to be a serious concern. Globally, over 1.2 billion children of all ages in 186 countries are affected by this. India was closed for the longest period, which was almost around 60-69 weeks. This has changed the process of learning dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, making online education a new normal procedure.

This new normalization, given the accessibility of online teaching-learning mechanism, was just for few. Laptops, internet connectivity and the infrastructure of schools and colleges to engage the students were indeed very limited here. Presently, we can also feel the implications on our education system for such a huge gap. Students who stayed in remote areas were hardly getting internet connectivity, which secluded them from academic access for more than a year, creating a 'lack' which is not just academic, but also in their social and cultural being.

While there are both the positive and negative socioeconomic impacts of this pandemic, the inevitable fact that the gap between students belonging to different income groups will widen and more so, will have lifelong impact on the children's lives. It was indeed noticed in recent times, in the classrooms, that students who had online classes in their starting college days behaved and accommodated very differently in physical classrooms. Students themselves admitted to us saying that they feel extremely restless to be seated for a class at a stretch and to sit with other students around them. It was also very difficult to bring back students to physical classrooms as many of them who initially hesitated to be in online classrooms now got accustomed to the flexibility of the online classroom and did not really want to come back. It is only after strict rules of the university that we could get all students on campus.

One of the key aspects of our pedagogy is fieldwork and internships, with service learning to have an exposure to the field with the theoretical knowledge given in the classrooms. These field visits and internships could not be possible where the students

took different Coursera courses to do and some took up online service learning, internships and research works. The connection with the larger community also got affected through this process. Despite online sessions with the community, it was indeed a challenge for the students to observe, work and learn during those times.

The possibilities of such a huge changing space obviously had some possibilities of online lecture series. Our students could organize various events together to bring academicians from different parts of the world. The student community through their creative engagements broadens their horizons. The flexibility of workspace got a new dimension with reimagined spatial configurations. The blended mode of learning did open huge possibilities to use technology as a part of their teaching learning process. However, the question of whether the online mode of learning can replace human interactions and the role of teachers in the classroom is now an emerging field of discussion.

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# ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT:** Online education presents both significant advantages and disadvantages. It is important for students and educators to be aware of these aspects and consider them when choosing learning modalities. The advantages of online education include improved accessibility, flexibility in learning, a variety of resources, online interaction and collaboration, the elimination of distance as a barrier to learning, reduced costs etc. On the other hand, disadvantages are also there, and these are needed to be considered when using education in the virtual environment, such as the effects of the lack of direct interaction, the need for self-discipline and personal organization, increased dependency on connectivity and technology, and so on. By evaluating and understanding these aspects, online education can be used effectively to facilitate the learning process and personal development of students, learners, and adults. However, if it completely replaces human direct contact education, it may develop certain skills at the expense of others.

## Advantages of Online Education

### *Improved accessibility*

Online education allows access to materials and courses from any location, eliminating geographical and time restrictions. Pupils and students can access online courses and resources at any time and learn at their own rhythm, offering improved accessibility compared to traditional education, which is one of the main advantages of this mode of learning. This improved accessibility comes with multiple benefits:

- Global access;
- Flexibility in scheduling;
- Cost reduction;
- Customization and adaptability;

- Diversity of resources.

Online education opens new opportunities for people who would otherwise not have access to education or would have difficulty engaging in a traditional learning program. By improving accessibility, online education aims to bring quality education into the lives of more people and promote lifelong learning.

### *Flexibility of learning*

Online education offers remarkable flexibility in the learning process, being one of the key advantages of this way of education. Students can choose to set their own learning schedule, allowing them to combine study with other responsibilities or commitments. This flexibility brings with it a lot of benefits, such as:

- Personalized program;
- Individual rhythm of learning;
- Access to content at any time;
- Flexible location;
- Continuous learning.

The flexibility of online learning refers to the ability to adapt and manage the learning program according to individual needs and personal circumstances. This can be especially useful for working people or parents who take care of children.

### *Variety of resources available*

Online education provides access to a wide range of resources. Here are some examples of resources available in online education:

- Multimedia materials;
- E-books and online reading materials;
- Open online courses;
- Collaborative learning platforms;
- Interactive learning, assessment, and feedback tools.

This variety of resources in online education gives students the opportunity to explore different ways of learning, access up-to-date materials and information, and engage in interactive and hands-on activities. Through these resources, online education encourages active, exploratory, and tailored learning.

### *Interaction and collaboration*

Online education platforms facilitate interaction and collaboration between students and teachers through discussion forums, chats, and video conferencing. This can

encourage active participation and exchange of ideas. Here's how online education facilitates interaction and collaboration:

- Flexible communication;
- Collaboration in projects;
- Debates and discussions;
- Personalized feedback and guidance;
- Networking and global collaboration.

By facilitating interaction and collaboration, online education promotes a dynamic and participatory learning environment where students can benefit from multiple perspectives, develop social skills, and improve understanding and assimilation of educational content.

### ***Reduced costs***

Online education can be more financially affordable than traditional education. Students can save money, for example, on transport, accommodation and traditional teaching materials. Here's how online education can cut costs:

- Lower tuition fees;
- Saving transport resources;
- Teaching materials and online textbooks;
- Flexibility of learning and daily schedule;
- Reduction of general expenses.

Overall, online education offers the opportunity to obtain quality education at low cost or more affordably, thus allowing more people to access education and fulfill their educational aspirations without being limited by financial constraints.

### ***Lifelong learning opportunities***

Online education provides lifelong learning opportunities, allowing individuals to educate and develop as they advance their careers or pursue their passions. Here's how online education offers lifelong learning opportunities:

- Accessibility and flexibility;
- Updating knowledge and skills;
- Professional development and career advancement;
- Lifelong learning;
- Through access to diverse educational resources;
- Autonomy and self-direction.

In conclusion, online education offers invaluable opportunities for lifelong learning, allowing individuals to develop, improve their knowledge and skills, and pursue their passions and interests in a flexible and affordable way.

### *Personalization of learning*

Online platforms and tools offer personalization of learning, allowing pupils and students to focus on the areas where they need the most support and progress at their own pace. This personalized approach has numerous advantages:

- Individual learning rhythm;
- Content adaptation;
- Diversity of resources;
- Individualized feedback and assessment;
- Self-assessment and self-reflection.

Personalization of learning in online education encourages student engagement and motivation, allowing them to actively engage in the learning process and develop their skills in a way tailored to their individual needs. Through the personalization of learning, the efficiency and quality of the online learning process can be optimized.

### *Increasing learning efficiency in people with increased self-learning capacity*

Online education has the potential to increase learning efficiency among individuals with increased self-learning ability. These individuals are characterized by their ability to self-motivate, organize their time and guide their own learning. Online learning provides an environment that fits these characteristics well, which can bring a lot of benefits:

- Flexibility and autonomy;
- Access to diverse and updated resources;
- Online interaction and collaboration;
- Self-assessment and progress monitoring;
- Development of technological skills.

Therefore, for people with increased self-learning ability, online education can be a conducive environment to develop their skills and achieve effective results in the learning process. It is important to underline that online education is not suitable for everyone and that there are individuals who may benefit more from the direct interaction and support of a traditional learning environment.

### *Access to high quality experts and resources*

Online education facilitates access to recognized experts in their field and high-quality resources that can contribute to deeper understanding and development of specialized skills. Here's how online education provides access to high-quality experts and resources:

- Experts in the respective field;
- Quality educational content;
- Special guests and online conferences;
- Access to global resources.

Through online education, students have the opportunity to learn from recognized experts and access high-quality educational resources, regardless of their geographic location. This accessibility to experts and resources helps to enrich the learning experience and develop knowledge and skills in a way that traditional education can be limited.

## **Disadvantages of Online Education**

### *Lack of face-to-face interaction / direct human contact*

Online education can be more challenging in terms of social interaction and human connection because it can lead to a lack of direct human contact, reducing the chance to have direct social interaction and teacher-student and peer-to-peer collaboration. Students may experience a lack of direct contact with their teachers and peers, which can affect their learning and personal development.

Here's how this lack of interaction affects online education:

- Limited non-verbal communication and emotional expression;
- Limited interaction and collaboration;
- Low motivation and commitment;
- Building social relationships and networking.

To overcome these disadvantages, it is important that online education platforms provide options and tools that facilitate interaction and collaboration between students and teachers. It is also important that online education provides opportunities for real-time interaction through video sessions or other online means of communication. In addition, the active involvement of teachers in providing individual feedback and support can partially compensate for the lack of direct human contact and encourage participants to be actively involved in the learning process.

### ***The need for self-discipline and personal organization***

To be successful in online learning requires strong self-discipline and the ability to organize your own time and learning tasks. Here's some examples to see on what aspects these can affect the online education:

- Time management;
- Self-motivation and focus;
- Organization of resources and materials;
- Self-discipline in meeting deadlines.

To develop these skills, students can apply the following strategies:

- Creating a study program and following it strictly;
- Setting short-term and long-term learning goals and monitoring progress;
- Finding a suitable learning environment, free of distractions and with access to necessary resources;
- Using technology and organizational tools, such as time and task management applications;
- Regular communication with teachers and colleagues through online learning platforms;
- Self-reflection and self-assessment to identify and improve weaknesses.

In conclusion, self-discipline and personal organization are crucial in online education. By developing these skills, students will be better prepared to engage in learning and achieve better academic results.

### ***The need for motivation***

Online learning also requires constant motivation. The absence of a physical structure and a fixed schedule can make it difficult to maintain a regular pace of learning. Some people may have difficulty self-motivating and maintaining focus in the absence of a traditional structure. Here's how the need for motivation can affect online education:

- Clarity of learning objectives;
- Importance of relevance and applicability;
- Constant support and feedback;
- Stimulating collaboration and interaction;
- Self-motivation and personal planning.

To foster motivation in online education it is important that educational institutions and teachers provide adequate resources and strategies to support and

encourage students. Students can also apply personal strategies such as finding a stimulating learning environment, setting clear and relevant goals, and recognizing and celebrating learning progress.

In conclusion, motivation is essential in online education to drive student engagement and success. By creating a motivational environment, providing constant support, and facilitating collaboration and interaction, online education can be more effective and engaging for students.

***It favors the development of certain brain functions at the expense of others***

Online education may influence the development of brain functions differently than traditional education, which may have consequences for cognitive development and specific skills. While it offers several advantages, such as access to resources and flexibility of learning, online education may not stimulate certain brain functions as much as learning with human interaction.

There are also concerns about developing attention and concentration skills. On the other hand, online education can boost certain brain functions and cognitive skills. For example, the use of technology and online platforms can develop technological and digital skills, such as surfing the Internet, using online communication tools, and managing digital information. Also, online education can offer good opportunities for self-organization and time management, which can help develop planning skills and self-discipline.

As a conclusion, online education may influence the development of brain functions differently than traditional education. While it may promote the development of certain skills and functions, there are also concerns about the impact on social interaction and attention. Balanced management of online and offline learning experiences can contribute to the holistic development of students and the development of a diverse set of cognitive skills.

***Reduced ability to concentrate on content taught online (over a longer period of time)***

Reduced ability to focus on content taught online for a longer period of time is a significant aspect of online education that can affect learning. Online learning often involves prolonged study sessions in front of a screen, which can lead to mental fatigue and difficulty maintaining long-term focus.

To overcome these challenges and improve the ability to concentrate in online learning over a longer period of time, certain strategies and practices are necessary. Here are some suggestions:

- Establishing a structured program;
- Eliminating distractions;
- Using attention management techniques;
- Use of interactive learning methods;
- Visual health care.

By applying these strategies and being aware of the effects of reduced attention span in the online environment, it is possible to improve learning efficiency and outcomes.

### *Decreased learning efficiency in people with reduced self-learning capacity*

Online education can cause additional difficulties for people with reduced self-learning capacity, which can lead to a decrease in the effectiveness of learning in this context. Online learning requires individual responsibility and self-discipline to navigate and assimilate learning content without the direct supervision of an educator.

People who have a reduced capacity for self-learning may experience difficulties in the following aspects:

- Structure and organization;
- Motivation and commitment;
- The need for guidance and support;
- Interaction and collaboration.

To compensate for these difficulties and increase the effectiveness of learning it is important to provide appropriate support and adapted resources for people with reduced self-learning capacity in the online environment. These may include:

- Structured and well-organized learning materials with clear instructions and directions for study;
- Access to online support such as tutorials, discussion forums and email support to answer questions and provide additional guidance;
- The use of adaptive learning technology, which can adapt the content and pace of learning according to the individual needs of students;
- Promoting collaboration and interaction among students through online means such as discussion platforms and group projects;
- Monitoring and regular feedback from teachers to provide guidance and keep students motivated. By providing tailored support and appropriate resources,

online education can become more accessible and effective for people with reduced self-learning capacity.

### ***Dependence on technology***

Learning only with the help of technologies not only selectively develops certain skills but can cause a desensitization of students to the problems of others, of the community (through the lack of direct social interaction). Here are some examples of issues which can affect the efficiency of online education:

- Addiction to electronic devices;
- Distraction / Loosing focus;
- Impact on mental health;
- Connectivity dependency;
- Impact on offline skills.

To avoid technology dependence in online education it is important that students apply the following strategies:

- Establishing a balance between time spent online and offline;
- Creating a program and a dedicated workspace for online learning;
- Limit access to social networks and other online applications during learning sessions;
- Practice offline skills such as direct communication and team project collaboration;
- Taking regular breaks and participating in outdoor or offline activities;
- Being aware of and properly managing the use of technology, students can avoid addiction and reap the benefits of online education in a healthy way.

### ***Connectivity and technical issues***

Online education requires access to appropriate technology (such as computers, laptops, or tablets) and is dependent on a stable internet connection. For people who do not have access to such resources or who face connectivity problems, these aspects constitute a great handicap, affecting the learning process and access to educational materials. Here's how this connectivity and technical issues can interfere with online education:

- Internet access;
- Technical and equipment issues;
- Dependence on technology;
- Impact on participation and engagement.

To minimize the impact of connectivity and technical issues in online education, the following measures can be considered:

- Ensuring adequate technological infrastructure in educational institutions and communities to provide quality Internet access;
- Providing technical support and resources for students and faculty to deal with technical issues and quickly resolve any outages;
- Developing alternative learning strategies and offline learning materials to compensate for the lack of connectivity in certain situations;
- Promote effective communication between students and faculty to report and resolve technical issues quickly.

With the right approach and tailored solutions, connectivity and technical issues can be overcome in online education, allowing students to benefit from a more efficient and successful learning experience.

### *The comfort of learning / teaching from home causes an increase in personal convenience and social loafing*

When students take online classes from home, there may be temptations to be less engaged and engage in behaviors of procrastination or de-allocating the effort needed to achieve their educational goals. This may be the result of a lack of direct supervision by teachers or peers, as well as a less formal and structured environment.

The convenience of learning or teaching from home in online education can bring with it an important aspect to consider - increased convenience and social laziness (also known as "social loafing"). This refers to the tendency to reduce effort or personal involvement in a shared endeavor when we are part of a group or environment where we are not directly observed or evaluated.

There are several factors that may contribute to this increase in social convenience and laziness in the online environment. One of these factors is anonymity or psychological distance that the virtual environment offers. Pupils or students may feel that they are not directly observed or given as much importance as in a physical environment. This can weaken individual responsibility and the desire to be actively involved in the learning process.

Also, the physical convenience of home learning can create a more relaxed and less stimulating atmosphere. The absence of a rigid schedule and formal environment can lead to the temptation to put off tasks or approach them in a more superficial way. Without the social pressure of a physical group or physically present teacher, pupils or students may tend to relax and invest less effort in the learning process.

To combat this trend of convenience and social laziness (loafing) in online education it is important that educators promote individual responsibility and active engagement of pupils or students in the learning process.

Thus, various strategies can be considered, such as:

- establishing clear deadlines;
- using regular assessments and feedback;
- promoting collaboration and interaction between students through online platforms;
- creating a stimulating and motivating virtual environment.

So, although the convenience of learning or teaching from home in online education brings multiple advantages, it is important to be aware of and manage the aspect of increasing convenience and social laziness. By implementing appropriate strategies and promoting individual responsibility, active involvement and maximization of the learning process in the online environment can be ensured.

## Conclusions

Online education has both significant advantages and disadvantages. It is important that pupils, students, and teachers are aware of these aspects and take them into account when choosing the way of learning. Online education offers improved accessibility, learning flexibility and a variety of resources, but can suffer from a lack of human direct interaction, the need for personal discipline and organization, and a reliance on technology and connectivity. By assessing and understanding these aspects, online education can be used effectively to facilitate students' learning and personal development. It is important to recognize that online education and traditional education are not mutually exclusive and can be integrated to maximize the benefits of both approaches. Combining online and direct learning on class experiences can provide a balanced educational environment that supports the development of diverse brain functions and cognitive skills.

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# DETERMINANTS OF THE DIGITIZATION OF ROMANIAN EDUCATION FOR THE SUSTAINABLE TRANSFORMATION OF THE FIELD

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**ABSTRACT:** The digitization of Romanian education is a context-part of a vision on education in Romania. This vision is built in a strategic manner, including mechanisms based on objectives established according to the educational requirements, pursued over a complete educational cycle. Understanding the key factors contributing to the successful integration of technology in Romanian education is crucial. This entails recognizing the emerging and enduring role it plays, as well as addressing the human resources aspect in terms of the requisite skill set for effectively utilizing technology to fulfill the educational mission. It also involves establishing within schools an inclusive environment where a diverse array of digital tools and technologies are seamlessly incorporated. These tools serve to enhance the acquisition and refinement of essential knowledge, skills, and competencies, indispensable for the growth and advancement of students. The article assesses the inclusive framework in which digitization can be incorporated, considering the factors that influence the quality of the Romanian educational system.

Educational systems employing virtual reality as a teaching tool rely on a subset of innovative and emerging technologies. Within Romanian education, novel learning environments have also surfaced, with an abundance of devices available. These devices provide educators with fresh, more efficient modes of interaction, while learners experience a heightened level of interactivity during lessons.

Virtual Reality (VR) is complemented by Augmented Reality (AR) and Mixed Reality (MR), aspects that can make important contributions to educational practice.

EduPol describes the connection between these forms of reality and their educational significance as “a fusion of the virtual environment and the physical world, allowing users to engage with the tangible objects in their vicinity” (EduPol, 2018, p. 19).

This means not just equipment, but an understanding of “the study and practices of facilitating learning and improving performance through the creation, use and appropriate management of technological processes and resources” (EduPol, 2018, p. 15). Their value is functional, transformative, and sustainable for education. Educational technology is an important determinant for the digital transformation of Romanian education.

Along with educational technologies, a significant contribution to the digitization of the education system is made by the *field's human resources*. It has the role of analyzing the learning opportunities offered, developing digital educational content, and supporting learning difficulties by rethinking training situations.

It is natural that a first step in achieving the objectives of digital adaptation of Romanian education is to equip it with technology, but the current curricular context, characterized by “excessive fragmentation by subject” requires a *transdisciplinary and cross-curricular* approach to the integration of teaching contents, creating “*bridges*” between different fields of knowledge.

An influencing factor in the digital transformation of the education system involves heightened emphasis on digital proficiency as a distinct domain (encompassing skills pertaining to information and data, creation of digital content, communication and teamwork, security, and effective issue resolution) (European Commission, Education and training, 2019, p. 10), by increasing the number of hours allocated in the framework plan of education since the primary cycle.

AmCham suggested that this approach should involve “shifting away from the traditional teaching method centered on delivering content, rote learning, and replication, and embracing an educational framework that fosters the cultivation of skills and competencies essential for students in an ever-evolving society and economy” (AmCham, 2021, p. 4).

Complementary to the contribution of human resources from education to the digital transformation of the education system is *the reconsideration of pedagogical/educational practices in response to the generational profile of students*.

Pedagogical practices are closely related to the initial training of staff (ITE) and their continuous professional development (CPD), but are analyzed at the level of attractiveness of content teaching, motivation for learning, well-being (teachers “must know how to integrate didactic technologies in teaching and learning and be able to use them effectively” (European Commission, Education and training, 2019, p. 11).

The existence at the European level of a “specific framework of digital competences for teachers (*European framework for the digital competence of teaching staff*) contributes to the openness of teachers to innovative pedagogies and to the understanding that these technologies bring to educational practice” (Redecker, 2017). In order to achieve the

digitization of Romanian pre-university education from the perspective of the contribution of human resources, it is necessary *to empower teaching staff in the area of digital and multimedia skills with educational value*.

Botnariuc et al. (2020) underscore the professional challenges faced by educators, encompassing “proficiencies in utilizing online platforms, crafting curricula for the virtual realm, inefficient time management when preparing and executing online teaching, absence of advanced technical resources, complexities arising from platform installation, maintenance, configuration, and oversight, insufficiencies in vital technological tools for effective classroom management, acquiring authentic feedback, and limited experience in leveraging the technological landscape to design and execute intricate, pertinent instructional activities woven into extended learning modules”.

Schleicher (2020) sees the digitization of education as closely related to social imperatives, such as overcoming gaps and discrepancies of a social and economic nature, facilitating “equitable access to quality education”.

In the Romanian educational system, through its digital transformation, at least an amelioration of the “major differences between schools in Romania in terms of the performance of online educational activity” can be ensured (AmCham, 2021, p. 4).

According to the World Economic Forum (2020) “*the most important skills for 2025 are problem solving, self-management, AmCham proposes “analytical and innovative thinking, active learning and the development of learning strategies, complex problem solving, critical thinking and analysis, creativity, originality and proactivity, the use, monitoring and control of technology or flexibility*” (AmCham, 2021, p. 8).

The factors influencing the digitalization of the pre-university education system in Romania can be categorized into three main areas: *the enhancement and modernization of educational infrastructure, the adoption of a novel teaching and evaluation framework, and the implementation of pedagogical approaches that align with the characteristics of the learners, coupled with the creation of digital educational resources*.

DESI (2022) states that such an approach is necessary, given Romania's location “in 27th place out of the 27 member states of the European Union in the 2022 edition of the Digital Economy and Society Index”. *Human capital, connectivity, integration of digital technology and digital public services* are taken as criteria for analysis and classification/key areas.

DESI (2022) Romania talks about “*the lack of basic digital skills among the Romanian population, with results well below the EU average (28% compared to 54%), but that Romania has foreseen measures within the PNRR, such as the adoption of the legislative framework for the digitization of education*”.

The same report presents the need for *transversal measures* such as: “defining the skills profile for teachers and revising the mandatory curriculum and the framework plan

for ICT subjects at all levels of education, aligning the educational system with the European Digital Competence Framework (DigiComp)".

Digicomp (first published in 2013 and constantly revised) is a "benchmark that describes digital competence in detail, five areas of knowledge, skills and attitudes that all citizens need in a digital society" (DESI, 2022, p. 34).

This report holds the potential to serve as a policy roadmap and can be readily customized for the establishment of localized and nationwide training resources and initiatives. It caters to educators across the educational spectrum, spanning from early childhood to higher education as well as adult learning, encompassing both mainstream and specialized, inclusive education, and informal learning scenarios. Its primary objective is to offer a comprehensive guiding structure for creators of digital proficiency models.

SELFIE (Self-reflection on Effective Learning by Fostering the use of Innovative Educational Technologies) is a free online self-reflection tool for schools based on Dig Comp, that helps schools identify their strengths and weaknesses in using digital technologies for teaching and learning.

In the field of digital education, the European Education System promotes a political initiative "to support the sustainable and effective adaptation of education and training systems (Digital Education Action Plan)", a context of "cooperation and dialogue between stakeholders in the field of education", developing free tools for schools and teachers.

A good premise with causal value for the digitization of the educational system is *implementation science*, "which tries to identify the causes of success and failure in terms of the translation of policies into practice" (European Commission, Education and training, 2019, p. 81).

Romania is at the stage of *implementing education digitization strategies in accordance with community recommendations* (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions – A digital agenda for Europe. COM/2010/245 final). Unlike other states that have a specific approach (focused exclusively on digital education), Romania is trying a broader perspective, in the form of investment plans in the digital infrastructure of schools.

An important moment in the digitization of Romanian education is represented by the Strategy for the Digitization of Education in Romania (SMART-Edu), which proposes "adapting the education and training system to technological evolution in the direction of training and perfecting human resources as an essential element of development, modernization and the innovation of society".

This starts from the educational practices reconfigured by the COVID-19 crisis, "which have put the focus on the fact that teaching, learning and emerging technology can no longer be considered disparate, but holistically shape the future of digital education" (National Strategy SMART-Edu, 2021).

Among the SMART-Edu priorities can be recognized the determinations of the digitization of Romanian education presented previously: the realization of a digital infrastructure, the development of the digital skills of teachers, the creation of a high-performance digital educational environment, the use of all resources and digital/emerging technologies, ensuring medium-term predictability.

The strategy is aligned with the European agenda regarding the digitization of education: the European Commission's Communication on the new Action Plan for Digital Education 2021-2027 - "Resetting Education and Training for the Digital Age", the European Commission's Communication on the creation of a European Education Area until 2025, New European Competence Agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience, Council Recommendation on education and training for sustainable competitiveness, social equity and resilience, UNESCO Recommendation on Open Educational Resources.

The elements presented here have the potential to establish a link between the digitization of pre-university education in Romania and the enduring evolution of this domain. The examined factors can be viewed as potential catalysts, applying either distinctly or synergistically, in driving both the digital revolution and the lasting metamorphosis of the education landscape in Romania.

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# TEACHING ON 'PANDEMIC' DURING THE PANDEMIC: EXPERIENCES OF TEACHING SOCIOLOGY OF HEALTH DURING COVID-19

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**ABSTRACT:** The outbreak of an unprecedented zoonotic disease in Wuhan, China soon turned out to be a pandemic. The exponential curve with which it was affecting people and the unpreparedness of global and national health systems to address it necessitated lockdowns as a measure to acquire some space and time to combat the pandemic COVID-19. The continued uncertainty and the fear of spreading illness made work-from-home and online classes a new reality. When the classes began in late May 2020 online, it was not just a change in the mode of teaching-learning. Both teachers and students were experiencing the fear of the yet-to-be-fully-known virus in their own personal spaces. Each individual's physical and emotional well-being was a very important pre-requisite for enabling cognitive and intellectual engagements in classroom settings. As a course instructor for 'Sociology of Health' at the post-graduate level, the further challenge was to experience the pandemic personally and with learners trying to have a critical sociological reading of the pandemic. This article examines the usage of films to address this challenge based on the experience of offering this course for two consecutive cycles during the pandemic. Students were given a set of four films related to various epidemics to critically analyze the films. The discussion that followed helped students to relate to their own experience of the pandemic. It helped in connecting an emotionally laden pandemic experience with objectivity and critical thinking.

## Introduction

The spread of COVID-19 has made the world almost to a standstill by March 2020. It disrupted the hitherto routine social life of people around the globe. The pandemic of coronavirus disease was caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 or SARS-CoV-2. The disease was first identified in Wuhan, China in December 2019. It was on 31 December 2019 that China alerted World Health Organization (WHO) of several flu-like cases in Wuhan. The virus was identified as coronavirus 2019-nCoV on 7 January

2020. The first reported case of coronavirus death was on 11 January 2020. By 31 January 2020, WHO declared public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC). On 4 February 2020, WHO requested the activation of the United Nations (UN) crisis management policy to establish a Crisis Management Team. The new coronavirus disease was given the name COVID-19 on 11 February 2020 and operational planning guidelines were released to ensure international coordination and operational support. It was with the aim of ensuring every country detect and diagnose the occurrence of COVID-19 at the earliest and act rapidly to stop human-to-human transmission at local levels.

The first COVID-19 case in India was reported from the state of Kerala in South India on 30 January 2020. All three cases during this phase were among the medical students who returned from Wuhan. Again, at the beginning of March, a family returned from Italy was detected with COVID-19, and with this, transmission of the virus began to spread. An elderly person with a travel history to Saudi Arabia was the first COVID-19 death reported in India on 12 March 2020. India is a country with a significant number of immigrants and a lot of internal migration. With many people with a travel history to affected countries, the number of COVID-19 cases began to increase. The exponential curve with which the virus began to spread also covered a very vast geographical area which made it very difficult to curtail. Like in other countries, restrictions on social interactions and imposing lockdowns were the only remedy to stop the further spread of the disease and also to ensure effective preparedness at the central, as well as state levels. The state of Kerala being the hub of the immigrants, NRIs (Non-Resident Indians), and also home to domestic migrants, declared lockdown on 23 March 2020. The first phase of the nationwide lockdown in India was declared on 25 March 2020.

Despite the extension of lockdowns, by October 2020 the pandemic had peaked in India, and by February 2021 there were indications that the COVID-19 spread is slowing down. The second wave of COVID-19 that shook the country by April 2021 was having more destructive consequences with unexpected levels of casualty. The economic slowdown and livelihood issues had made the government lift restrictions. Socio-cultural events like weddings, festivals, sporting events, and elections in some states with poorly implemented and monitored safety precautions contributed to this situation. The vaccination program had begun in India by 16 January 2021 and some educational institutions and other offices had also started functioning in a hybrid mode by this time.

Although the number of new cases began to drop by the end of May 2021, WHO declared the two variants of COVID-19 in India as 'Delta' and 'Kappa'. By the end of August 2021, it was reported that India might have reached a stage of endemicity (Bhaduri, 2021), with lower or moderate levels of disease transmission. By March 2022, almost 70 percent of the Indian population had received at least one dose of the COVID-

19 vaccine and the government lifted all restrictions except face masks and social distancing. International flights were resumed on 27 March 2022.

## The Context

I would like to place myself as an educator handling a course on 'Sociology of Health' in the above-narrated background of COVID-19 prevalence and spread in India. After around 2-4 weeks of the initial lockdown, educational institutions have started thinking about shifting to an online mode, and many, including my university, started online classes for senior students by May 2020. The attempts at blended learning have been there at a minimum level in some educational institutions, but for the majority, the current phase was a novel experimentation. Adequate preparations were made by the university to enable this transition. Apart from completing an online course on online teaching and learning in the Coursera platform, the institutional-level online Faculty Development Program was exclusively focusing on online teaching. The technical division of the university was always there to help the faculty and students address the technical challenges. Investments in video conferencing tools and AI-assisted assessment platforms were another support at the university level to ensure a seamless online teaching-learning experience. A survey conducted among the students also found that most of them would be able to attend online classes. Additional support mechanisms were designed for those who may not be able to attend online classes on a regular basis.

Technology only aids teaching, not substitutes it. Along with these technical aspects, a focus on continued training and the right attitude can help us adapt to the disruptive learning space. With COVID-19, the psychological barriers to change have also come down. But there were other aspects to be considered too. As an educator, what perplexed my mind was the ways in which we tried to make our students feel that nothing changed, so that they could focus on completing the syllabus. The same was true for other teachers also.

Between the four walls of a classroom, the teachers used to feel comfortable. Now while navigating through Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Team, or Webex to get connected with students and searching for the right technology, things are changing. Although the teacher looks at the screen, the thought that who would be at the other end makes her/him more conscious. Each subject is unique, each cohort is different and so is each session. The constant inner desire to have a 'perfect' classroom engagement each time they turn to the communication medium may haunt them. Can I transmit the magic in me to my students while glaring at the webcam?

Yes, some of these online platforms enable even passive learners to be part of discussions since they need not talk and can type. You can record your classes and share them with your students who face connectivity issues. You can demand them to read the materials uploaded and complete the weekly assignment because you are trained to keep your students 'engaged'. But what really resonates through the minds of students while they mute themselves and look blankly at the screen? Do they cherish speaking about what they had gone through over these few months of uncertainty or were they bored to the extent that they really need something to keep them engaged and monitored?

Are we adding to their anxiety, if they have, when there is a technical glitch each time and the teacher monitoring their attendance? What if all children at home have classes at the same time and access to gadgets and connectivity becomes a concern? What the student may feel when they know that they are one among just 1-2 percent (this percentage is limited to the students enrolled in the university based on a survey and does not reflect the case in India) who cannot have access to seamless connectivity? What if the family is navigating through a very bad situation owing to the loss of jobs or pay cuts and hence needs to prioritize household expenditure? What about the looming pain of those who already have some mental health concerns? How can a teacher identify those pains in silence and kindle hope and faith in them? After all, beyond all the 'subject expertise' you have, is this empathy that marked you as a teacher. Can we wait for the students to approach us if they have some concerns? As a teacher, I want to meander through all these to help the students live in the present and make sense of the world and life and not make them in a state of false consciousness that the world remains unchanged.

While this is a general concern, handling the course on Sociology of Health for postgraduate students during the odd semesters was found to be a bigger concern for me, especially during May 2020 and May 2021, as the uncertainty and anxiety over COVID-19 was very vivid in both these times. In May 2020, both teachers and students were experiencing the fear of the yet-to-be-fully-known virus in their own personal spaces, and in May 2021 India was grappling with the second wave of COVID-19.

Everyone's physical and emotional well-being is a very important prerequisite for enabling cognitive and intellectual engagements in classroom settings. As a course instructor for 'Sociology of Health' at the post-graduate level, the further challenge was to experience the pandemic at a personal level and along with learners trying to have a critical sociological reading of the pandemic. Being a faculty handling a course on the Sociology of Health during the pandemic, I felt it is very important to go beyond the syllabus to cover the pandemic. By May 2021, I had a unit on epidemics and pandemics in the syllabus. It was not just about objectively dealing with epidemics, pandemics, zoonotic diseases, and WHO frameworks. Being in the midst of all uncertainties, anxieties,

and fears in the month of May-June 2020, I felt it is important to help the students have a reflective understanding of what is going on within themselves and around them. It was to help them in exercising their sociological imaginations (Mills, 1959) by connecting personal experience with the larger social context. Considering the situation is very emotional to many, one needs to find a pedagogy that engages the students and something that motivates them to have a systematic inquiry.

This article narrates my experience in using films with a set of pre- and post-exercises to discuss the pandemic at a time when we were all experiencing the pandemic directly or indirectly.

## Films as a Pedagogy

Films as a pedagogic tool are not something new. The literature discusses teaching with and about films. Films and documentaries are generally used as sources for teaching history lessons at high schools and colleges. The multicultural nature of campuses in higher education also necessitates the need for active teaching methods including the use of films as a pedagogic tool. Von Morze (2008) discusses how the use of films could help in an in-depth understanding of abstract concepts in Sociology, critical interpretation, and active engagements by students. Marcus (2005) examines how the use of films could nurture social thinking and awareness of varied perspectives. Driscoll (2000) describes how active instruction through films could enhance retention, understanding, reasoning, and critical thinking.

Jeremy Stoddard (2018) warns against equating the media practices of youth to media literacy. According to him the consumers of media need not necessarily reflect or evaluate what they watch. So, it is wrong to assume that watching a particular visual text could influence their understanding of the past as well as issues in contemporary society. Moskovich and Sharf (2012) discuss the use of films to teach Sociology at college levels. They use a worksheet prior to the screening of films to prepare students for attentive viewing. The worksheet contains the objectives as well as relevant sociological concepts. During the screening, the worksheet helps students to collect data relating to the concepts and this would be used during the post-viewing activity which would be mainly classroom discussions and debates. S Mishra (2018) also examines the role films play in the collaborative construction of knowledge by explaining it in the context of the International Baccalaureate program. The Morpho functional laboratory Extension Project was an attempt during the pandemic towards health education by showing the participants edited movies that were found to be effective (de Souza Ramos et al., 2021).

## Thoughtful Instructional Activities Through Films

Films are considered to be a powerful medium that engages and motivates students. However, a teacher needs to keep the specific learning outcomes while selecting the films. As an educator, I wanted to introduce the social, psychological, political, and public health dimensions of the pandemic and started searching for appropriate films that would indicate these aspects in the context of other zoonotic diseases. Various websites and blogs that discuss the use of films as a pedagogy in medical anthropology helped me to streamline my search. Access to the movies was another aspect I had in my mind while choosing the films.

The students were given the option to watch the documentary '*We Heard the Bells-the Influenza of 1918*' and any one of the three movies. '*We Heard the Bells: The Influenza of 1918*' is a documentary that provides accounts by survivors or witnesses of the effects of the influenza of 1918 on their surrounding societies and neighborhoods, as well as information on the nature of the pandemic's virus from medical scientists. It begins with elderly women, who were in their childhood at the time of the pandemic, explaining how the number of deaths from the influenza virus was very high, how their near and dear ones were infected, how fear spread in their local communities and how their parents placed themselves at great risk when helping their community members. It then progresses to talking about possible factors for the rapid spread of the virus, especially the lack of implementing strict measures by public authorities for minimizing contact between people and mentioned how the virus attacked in particular otherwise healthy young adults. Furthermore, it talks about the efforts of a young Swedish medical student in the 1950s and later, a scientist at the Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in the 1990s with the former's help, to find the cause of the virus via studying tissue samples of deceased Innuits' bodies buried at an Alaskan village, later determined to be caused by birds. The documentary concludes with the witnesses' accounts of how people volunteered to assist in treatment efforts by health workers and doctors in their local communities, mentions of the success of precautionary measures implemented by some towns and cities in the United States and medical scientists' mentions of how the medical community as well as the general public are more prepared to counter the spread of the flu and, at the time of making the documentary, the H1N1 Swine Flu outbreak. This documentary was suggested as a compulsory one as it closely resonates with the socio-political response to COVID-19. Being able to relate to a historic event may help address the uncertainty looming around the ongoing pandemic. Although every student was

expected to watch this documentary, they were given the freedom not to watch if they experience difficulty at the emotional level. This was the case with the other suggested movies also.

*'93 Days'* is a 2016 Nigerian drama thriller film directed and co-produced by Steve Gukas. It tells the story of the 2014 Ebola outbreak in Nigeria and its successful containment by health workers from a Lagos hospital. The story of *'93 Days'* centers on the sacrifices made by men and women who risked their lives to make sure the Ebola virus was contained before it became an epidemic when it was imported into Nigeria by a Liberian American diplomat.

Ebola virus disease (EVD) is one of the deadliest viral diseases, which was discovered in 1976 when two consecutive outbreaks of fatal hemorrhagic fever occurred in different parts of Central Africa. The first outbreak occurred in the Democratic Republic of Congo (formerly Zaire) in a village near the Ebola River, and that's how the virus got its name. The second outbreak occurred in what is now South Sudan, approximately 500 miles away. The virus is transmitted to people from wild animals and spreads in the human population through human-to-human transmission.

This movie tells the true-life story of Adadevoh, played by veteran Nigerian actress Bimbo Akintola, and the medical team at First Consultant Medical Center whose quick actions saved countless lives. Adadevoh led the team who oversaw the treatment of Patrick Sawyer, the first patient diagnosed with Ebola in Nigeria. She stopped Sawyer from leaving the hospital to board a flight to Calabar in southern Nigeria. Adadevoh also provided staff with relevant information about the virus, procured protective gear, and quickly contacted relevant officials. Eight people in Nigeria, including Adadevoh, later died. Federal and State governments in Nigeria provided ample financial and material resources, as well as well-trained and experienced national staff. Isolation wards were immediately constructed, as were designated Ebola treatment facilities, though more slowly. Vehicles and mobile phones, with specially adapted programs, were made available to aid real-time reporting as the investigations moved forward. The movie shows the struggle of the healthcare workers when a new pandemic hit the community. It mainly focuses on the timely interventions made by the health workers. Five of the healthcare professionals, including the doctor who led the team lost their lives.

*'I Am Legend'* (2007) is a US movie on the plague. It is a post-apocalyptic movie where Robert Nivelle, a scientist, somehow immune, is the last survivor in what is left of New York City, and maybe the world, by the terrible virus that was unstoppable, incurable, and manmade. Initially, the virus was created to cure cancer and was intended to use the virus to work for people instead of against, and was mutated through the genetic level, but it backfired. But he is not alone. He is surrounded by the infected – the

victims of the plague who have mutated into carnivorous beings who can only exist in the dark and who will devour or infect anyone or anything in their path.

Being driven by only one hopeful hope that there would be more survivors around the world, he insisted that through his radio broadcasting, and never did he know he would get a response from the survivors. The film portrayed both the medical and social consequences of the virus.

*'Virus'* (2016) is an Indian movie in Malayalam about the Nipah outbreak. The movie revolves around the struggles and measures that the district-level authorities faced and adopted to control the epidemic. The whole city was put under lockdown after the virus spread had been recognized. Many officials and health personnel were on duty taking up the responsibility to save thousands of lives. The movie gives an insight into how deadly the virus was. The specialists were able to track the symptoms that occurred in the victims and studied the behavior of the virus with keen importance. In the movie, it could be observed how the officials along with various help managed to track down the virus spread from the index patient and connect it to the other patients who tested positive with the same health conditions as the infected.

During the incubation period, the patients and the people who came in direct or indirect contact with the infected were quarantined and observed to give the best medical attention possible. As per the WHO's standards, there was no medical protocol declared for the treatment of the infected people with the Nipah virus. The smart and patient treatment methods the district adopted regardless of the absence of the protocol were able to control the spread of the virus which could have destroyed a large number of people with medical negligence. The virus was observed to have a high killing capacity, but the capacity to spread was a bit lower compared to the coronavirus outbreak. Public places were shut down, the roads were empty, and only a few hospitals with specialized Nipah virus wards were open during that period.

Later, another movie, *'Contagion'*, was added to this list based on suggestions from students. The students have chosen the movies based on their access to online streaming platforms like Amazon Prime or Netflix. The Indian movie was available on YouTube. The link for the documentary on 1918 influenza was provided to the students through the learning management system.

The task for students was not just to have an understanding of what a health emergency looked like. They watched it with the aim of gaining conceptual clarity on the social dimensions of health and community responses to a health emergency. This was with the larger goal of helping to make sense of the uncertainty of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in their own lives.

Discussions on the pandemic were initiated through a short quiz on the Quizziz platform on COVID-19, and also a reflective personal narrative on their response or experience on COVID-19. It was an open-ended question without any fixed guidelines, giving flexibility to the students on how to approach it. They were given an option, either to share it with the class or faculty, or keep that as a personal note. This was followed by watching the movie. One week's time was given to the students to watch the movies. The post-viewing activities included a reflective journal based on the visual text, as well as a virtual classroom discussion. Students were encouraged to share their affective reaction to the film they watched and how they could relate the events and happenings in those films to what they experience at present owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Surprisingly, during both years, there were many students who watched more than one movie and sometimes all the movies. The discussion based on the movies helped the class to identify the dimensions to be discussed in the context of an epidemic/pandemic which is zoonotic in its origin. Students started actively sharing their personal experiences of the pandemic in comparison to the movies they watched. This was followed by discussions on the concepts of zoonotic disease, epidemic vs pandemic, One health approach and Manhattan principles, WHO framework on COVID-19, as well as public health approaches to any pandemic. There were ample discussions on how the pandemic goes beyond the status of a health emergency to that of a pandemic of poverty, a pandemic of stigma, as well as a pandemic of intense social action. Students were also able to initiate discussions on medicalization and Foucault's power discourses in the context of the pandemic.

A series of these kinds of in-class discussions, activities, and personal reflective notes gradually helped students to reflect on a very intense personal experience for many, in an objective dimension also. The final task for the students was to come up with an essay on the ongoing pandemic by connecting the global, national, and local aspects.

## Discussion

Fred Newmann's framework of classroom thoughtfulness describes three characteristics. It should promote higher order thinking, which is possible through disciplined inquiry. It also indicates the sustained study of important topics beyond the factual level to more abstract or conceptual meanings, and the third characteristic is about having meaningful discussions and deliberations in which most of the students are engaged (Newmann, 1990). Watching the movie with a set of pre- and post-activities along continued discussions helped in the thoughtful learning on the pandemic.

The meaningful learning theory (Ausubel, 1977) is about the learners connecting the new event to an already-known set of concepts. The films chosen here not just relate to an event in history, they represent a perspective and need to be understood and interpreted based on the time and place of production. The learning outcome was to gain an understanding of how the community and the public healthcare system respond when a health emergency arises.

For instance, the movie '*93 Days*' initiated discussions on the public health approach to an epidemic/pandemic. It is very important to provide the public with the right information from the right sources during a public health emergency. Due to this fear, there is an increased urge among the public to seek information. In times of public health crisis, the state and other government institutions face difficulties curbing rumormongering through various media platforms. Dr. David Brett-Major's advice to Dr. Ada Igonoh and the ambulance drivers proves that the right information about the disease can boost confidence among patients and healthcare workers. Students were discussing the rumors about the pandemic in their own regions. The movie '*Virus*', too was more on public health preparedness. Students could connect with reported stories on how such medical emergencies impact the health workers and also the lives of health workers whom they know personally. There were some students who were involved in volunteering for providing assistance to the needy in their neighborhood, and when they shared their experiences, it was a motivation for others. All these discussions resulted in the collaborative construction of knowledge on how community and health systems responded to the pandemic at a local level, and also on the role of youth and their responsibilities during any emergencies like the pandemic.

Students opined that they could best connect with '*We Heard the Bells*' and it helped them to reflect on their own anxieties and fears about the pandemic in a more realistic manner. The movie '*I am Legend*' initiated discussions around medical ethics, clinical trials, and also on the anthropocentric worldview. The diverse opinions and remarks of the students during the discussion phase were mapped into a Webex whiteboard and saved for further discussions. Students kept on adding notes to their documents as and when we covered the contents related to the sociology of the pandemic and public health approach to COVID-19 which finally resulted in a term paper by students on COVID-19 connecting the local-level experiences with that of the global. In their feedback, students commented on how they appreciated the way in which a discussion was initiated on their personal crisis, and how through a set of pre- and post-activities they could finally come up with a comprehensive understanding of the pandemic.

## Conclusion

Teaching on pandemic during the pandemic was very inevitable, at the same time, considering the possible emotional status of the students, this was not an easy task. The feedback from students during both years endorses the set of activities and introduction of movies as an effective way to initiate discussions on a disturbing topic. Most of the students were from pandemic-affected households or neighborhoods and others had vicarious grief. All of them opined that these activities had a cathartic effect. As an educator, I learned to use films as a pedagogy with a proper plan for attentive viewing and reflection to come up with collaborative construction of knowledge. Thoughtful instructional practices result in a meaningful engagement of sensitive or difficult topics in class.

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# INTERNSHIP OF THE SPECIALIZED SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS

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**ABSTRACT:** During the COVID-19 pandemic in the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, social work students had limited or no access to non-governmental institutions or organizations to carry out their mandatory internships. Even in this situation solutions were found, as is the case of the students from the Social Assistance specialization of "Ştefan cel Mare" University of Suceava, Romania, who, for 2 semesters, had to take the practical course online. This is proof that, even though they did not have the opportunity to have direct contact with the beneficiaries, they had productive online meetings with specialists from various fields. Thus, every week, the students met in virtual classes with practicing social workers from all over the country and learned about the work and the role of a social worker in hospitals, in rural communities, working with the elderly or with women in pregnancy crisis. They discussed and were informed about practical aspects of various social work fields: child protection, human trafficking, prevention/reduction the risks of HIV, drugs and sexual exploitation, deprivation of liberty or working with disabled people. The paper presents the experience and perceptions of one generation of social work students who, through the questionnaire-based survey method, expressed their opinion regarding the implementation of their internship in the online environment during the COVID-19 pandemic, being able to observe the obstacles, but also the opportunities in carrying out the internship online.

## Introduction

In higher education, almost all universities have switched to online teaching, and, with a greater or lesser effort, the activities continued without problems. The teaching staff had to rethink the content of the subjects and adapt it to substitute face-to-face

interaction (Nadolu, 2020, p. 6-7). The practice's discipline specialty regime in the education plan of social assistance students is a specialized discipline (DS), being part of the category of optional disciplines (DO). The development of the education plan for the specializations of the faculties belongs to the autonomy of the universities, but it must obey the rules imposed by the ARACIS<sup>1</sup> commission. So, the education plans, within certain limits, can be different, for the same specialization, in different universities. This paper presents the experience during the internship students of the Social Assistance specialization at the "Ştefan cel Mare" University in Suceava had during the COVID-19 pandemic. The education plan of the students of this specialization stipulates that they carry out their internship during two semesters of the second year of study, namely semesters 3 and 4, 56 hours per semester, accumulating at the end of the second year of study a total number of 112 hours of practice. The general objective, according to the subject function, is: "students' understanding of the support/help relationship in social assistance and the acquisition of methodological and applicative aspects in accordance with the understanding and analysis of cases from various categories of people in difficulty" (USV, 2023). Also, during the internship, students must acquire and apply important techniques, methods and tools used for social cases in the field of social work. Typically, students do their internships within non-governmental institutions and organizations, with which the university has signed collaboration agreements. Students can do both observational practice, where the work does not allow direct contact with beneficiaries due to ethical and confidentiality issues (such as working with people deprived of liberty, in probation services or with cases of victims of domestic violence or women in crisis pregnancy), as well as practice through the direct involvement of students in working with beneficiaries (cases of children and young people from the protection system or from single-parent families, materially deprived, marginalized communities, ethnic Roma, etc.), but also by studying social documents necessary for the work of a social worker. In Romania, as in other countries, there were periods between the end of 2020 and 2021 when higher education moved entirely to the online environment and almost everything remained that way for three semesters. The lifestyle of students rapidly changed in search for a necessary adaptation to the new social reality. Online school can facilitate an increase in school performance (for those motivated and willing to do so), but

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<sup>1</sup> The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, which ensures compliance with the quality standards of higher education in Romania.

it can also result in an incomplete student profile. In the online school, an attempt was made to preserve student-centered education, in a context where digitization, as a technological and cognitive resource, is not yet evenly distributed in society (Nadolu, 2021, p. 8). Considering the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, although restrictions have been imposed and many of the courses of schools and universities in the countries affected by the pandemic have suspended their physical courses and moved online or operated in a hybrid system at "Ştefan cel Mare" University in Suceava, courses were held in a hybrid system, throughout the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. There were periods when students were physically present at seminars and laboratories during the COVID-19 pandemic. The health crisis generated by the COVID-19 pandemic has led to students experiencing an incomplete student life. The loss of the specific experiences of student life, the face-to-face socialization between students, the climate of the small group as a whole were diminished or could not be realized at all (Nadolu, 2021, p. 25). However, considering that in the social field we work with vulnerable people (elderly in residential centers, children and young people from the special protection system, etc.), due to the risk of infection with the SARS-COV-2 virus, the students did not have access to institutions and/or NGOs, so they carried out the internship in the classrooms, but connected online with the specialists and practitioners in the social field. In general, in all universities, the debates in the seminars turned into sporadic interventions and involved a few active participants and the closed cameras minimized the interaction. The teaching process worked at the minimum parameters necessary for the formation of specific skills (Nadolu, 2021, p. 25-26). The management of "Ştefan cel Mare" Suceava University decided that during the pandemic only courses will be held online, and seminar activities, including specialized practice, will be held physically at the university. If we were to summarize in a few phrases the life of students during online, these would be: "*in the virtual world*", "*I moved to the online environment*", "*I am bored with the online courses*", "*I eat and listen*", "*time passes hard*", "*represented by an avatar*", "*on YouTube*", "*a society obsessed with the visual*" (Nadolu, 2020, p. 10-11). Having the role of coordinating the specialized practice, I thought about how to offer students the opportunity to come into contact, if not with beneficiaries of programs and projects in the social field, then at least with the specialists. The didactic activity in higher education in Romania was carried out both synchronously (chat-type, live conversations on the platforms used in all universities - ZOOM, Google Meet) and asynchronously (via e-mails, forum posts - Google Classroom,

Moodle, dedicated Facebook pages, WhatsApp groups or any other applications). Because practice could not be carried out in these ways while the students were in the amphitheater, they had online contact with specialists and practitioners in the social field and from all over the country. The specialists and practitioners went online on the Google Meet platform, and the students heard and watched them from the amphitheater. Bobu and Jitaru (2022) emphasized that students who studied online during the COVID-19 pandemic developed feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness, insecurity, which worsened with the distancing imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, Blajau & Chipăilă (2021) showed that students were exposed to additional stress with the onset of the pandemic, the states of anxiety and sadness increasing. The situations were influenced by mass media, to which was added the impossibility of socialization, the uncertainties regarding professional careers, but also the lack of trust in the authorities that managed the health crisis. There are studies (Ciovoi et al., 2020) which show that students consider online teaching to be less effective and they rated the isolation period as less educationally productive. And yet, the same study showed that 56.4% of responding Stomatology students rated online teaching as more effective or similar compared to face-to-face teaching. A recent development in the field of education is digital pedagogy. This can be simply summarized as the incorporation and implementation of innovative technical tools and approaches in the teaching and learning process (Alam & Hameed, 2023 apud Väätäjä & Ruokamo, 2021). We can say that during the internship of Social Work students, we used digital pedagogy during the COVID-19 pandemic, given that all meetings between students and practicing specialists took place mediated by a laptop with an Internet connection, on an online e-Learning platform, and also requiring a video projector.

## **Research methodology**

The present article is based on research carried out among students in the second year of study, full-time education, from the Social Assistance specialization at the University "Ştefan cel Mare" Suceava. The universe of the research is made up of 51 students, who during the period October 2021-February 2022 carried out their internship for 14 weeks, having provided 4 hours per week of specialized practice throughout the first semester of the 2021-2022 academic year. As the person responsible for the coordination of the students' practice, given the restrictions imposed by the context of the

COVID-19 pandemic, I thought of a program in which, every week, on a Friday, when the 4 hours of specialized practice were planned, all 51 students would come to a lecture hall and listen online to specialists and practitioners in the field of social assistance. The program was designed in such a way as to cover the main subfields in which social workers in Romania work. Thus, during the 14 weeks that the specialist practice program lasted, the students came into online contact with 24 practicing specialists, most of them female, of which 5 were male. The 24 specialists invited online were active in the following areas of social assistance: in the field of child protection and adults with disabilities, in the medical field (in hospitals, at UPU emergency units), in the field of supervision of people deprived of liberty - prisons, in the field of community social assistance - in rural areas, in the field of protection of ethnic minorities - Roma children, persons and families, with children and young people from the special protection system, with women in crisis pregnancy - risk of abortion, in the field of human trafficking protection and in the field of supporting people addicted to alcohol, drugs and other substances or behaviors.

The purpose of the research was to survey the opinion of students from the Social Work specialization, second year of study, regarding the perception of the experience of conducting the online internship during the COVID-19 pandemic.

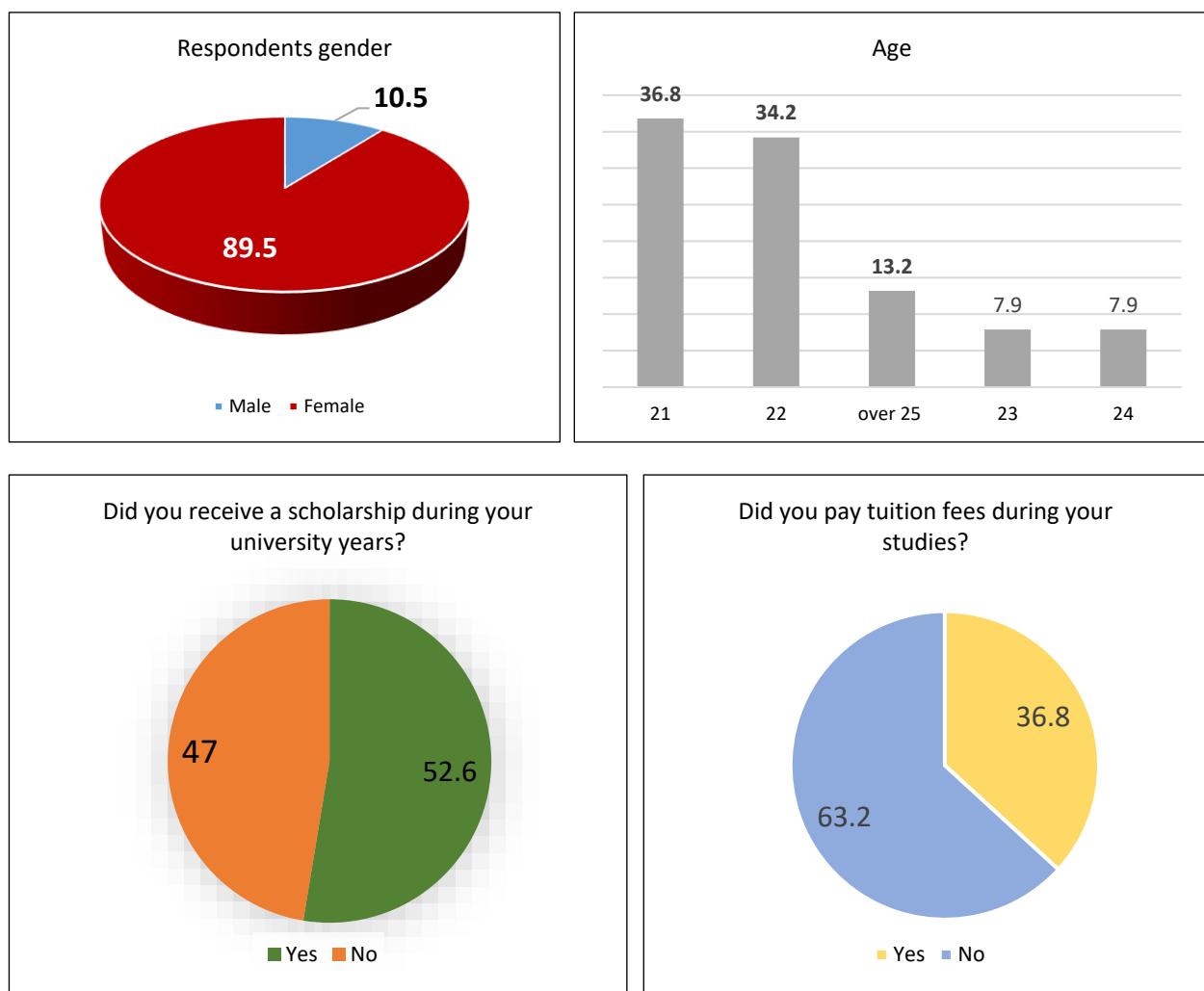
The question from which we started this research was: How satisfied are social work students and what are the advantages and disadvantages of conducting the online internship, that they completed for a semester for their professional training?

The objectives of the research were (OB.1): Measuring the degree of satisfaction, usefulness and influence of the decision to practice in a specific field of social assistance, of the students, as a result of the online internship, during the COVID-19 pandemic and (OB.2): Identifying the obstacles/disadvantages and opportunities/advantages that the students consider they encountered and/or had, as a result of the online internship, during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The research method used is the questionnaire-based sociological survey method, while a self-administered online questionnaire through the Google Forms platform was used as a tool and technique. We used an availability sample, from the 51 students of the second year; the group of subjects is composed of 38 students who answered the questionnaire, which means 74.5% of the total of those who participated in the internship program carried out online, for 14 weeks, with a weekly frequency of 4 hours. We continue to reproduce the main results of the research.

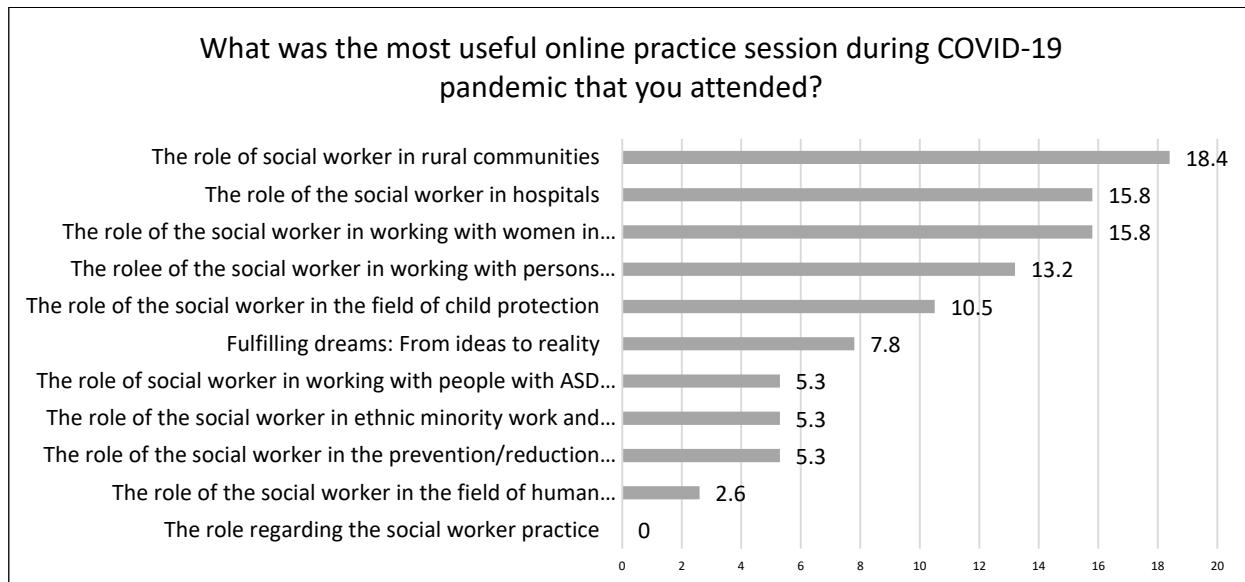
## Results

The profile of the respondent students shows that the majority are female, 89.5%, the remaining 10.5% being male. A significant proportion, 71%, are between 21-22 years old, followed by those who are over 25 years old in proportion of 13.2%. A little over half of the students majoring in social work, 52.6%, received a scholarship during their years of study. The vast majority, 63.2%, did not pay any tuition fees during their studies.



*Figure 1. Socio-educational data about students*

Of the 11 topics covered by the specialist practitioners throughout the semester, the students found the one dealing with the role of the social worker in rural communities the most interesting, 18.4% stating this. Equally in students' preferences, 15.8% of students chose each of the 2 themes addressed, namely: the role of the social worker in working with women in crisis pregnancy and the role of the social worker in hospitals. The least useful practice session is the one on the role of the social worker in the field of human trafficking, with 2.6% of students choosing it (**Figure 2**).



*Figure 2. The most useful practice session*

## Reflections on the Online Practice

When given the opportunity to share their impressions following the online internship, almost all students referred to the unique experience of having access to specialists from different branches of social work that motivated them and made them create an overall vision of the social work system. Despite the fact that it was conducted online, the students describe the practical experience as a pleasant one, interesting, beneficial and unique, from which they learned a lot of information:

“It was useful and interesting information. Personally, I would repeat this practice program again, I really liked it”.

“I learned a lot of information from the specialists who work with different beneficiaries. I believe that if we were doing physical practice, we would not learn so much information in such a short period of time”.

“The online environment constituted the framework for practice sessions that we would not have had in any other context. I have come to know social work professionals with whom it would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have a face-to-face interaction.”

“The online internship program came with a lot of benefits and opportunities for us students, because we received extremely useful information from a wide range of fields. Unlike the practice in institutions, I had the advantage of seeing social work in several fields and it was an extra help in choosing the field in which each of us wants to be active”.

“Conducting practice classes during the pandemic was beneficial for us, the students, because we were presented with aspects that we could not have acquired on our own.”

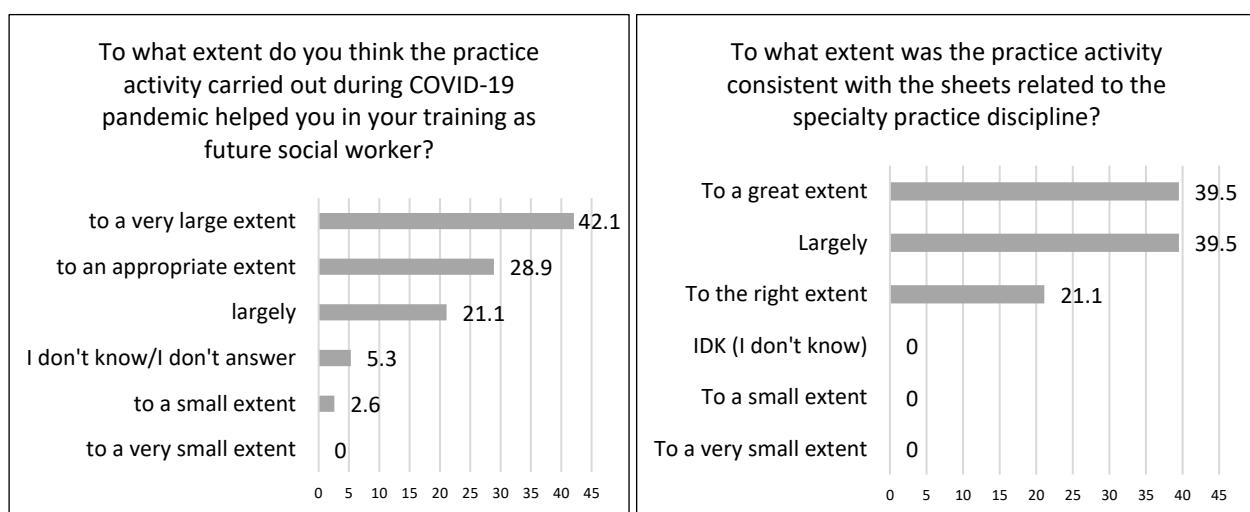
"The practice was a very pleasant experience. The multitude of invited specialists was beneficial because in this way we could form an opinion about each field in which the social worker works. A meeting in person would have been much more beneficial, but the pandemic conditions did not allow it."

"Although it also had negative implications, I considered that the online practice was also an opportunity because I was able to interact with specialists from very varied fields that we probably wouldn't have interacted with if I was practicing physically (in institutions)."

"The specialized practice conducted online also had some advantages. For example, if we went to institutions, we probably wouldn't have had the chance to find out so much information about so many fields".

### The Impact of Online Practice in Training as Future Specialists

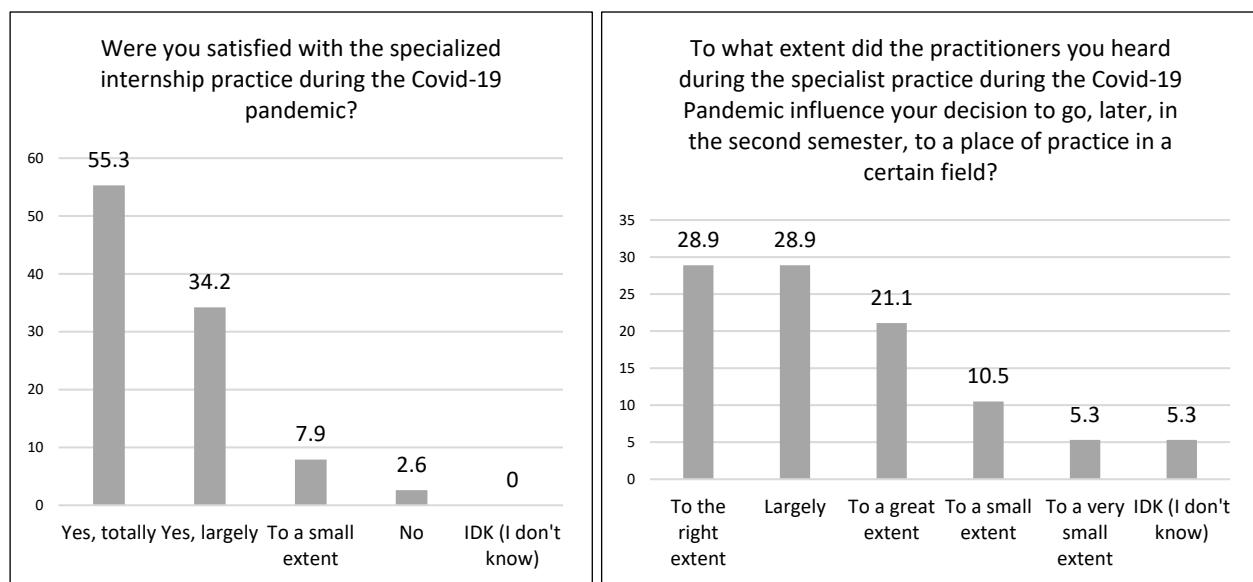
Asked to what extent the online practice activity carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic helped them in their professional training, 42.1% of students rated it as helping them to a great extent. In fact, if we were to add the 3 positive options (to a suitable extent, to a large extent and to a very large extent), the percentage is 92.1% of students who consider the internship carried out with invited online specialists to be helpful. Only 2.6% of students believe that online practice helped them to a small extent. All the responding students say that the online practice activity was in accordance with the university curriculum, which means that the objectives were achieved, and the skills were formed, even in the conditions of the online practice. 39.5% of the students say that the activity of the online practice was in high and very high agreement with the subject studied (**Figure 3**).



**Figure 3.** Usefulness of practice sessions and consistency with the academic curriculum

## Satisfaction with Online Practice and Influence on the Future Decision to Practice in a Certain Field

More than half of the students who took the internship during the COVID-19 pandemic with online guest practitioners, that is, 55.3% of them, consider they are mostly satisfied, and 34.2% are completely satisfied. The percentage of those who are not satisfied is below 10%. Out of these, 7.9% say they are slightly satisfied, and 2.6% are not at all satisfied with the online internship. The role of the specialist practitioners invited online who work with different categories of beneficiaries in the social field (children, young people, women, elderly) was also to orient the students towards these fields, and to make the students aware of which category of beneficiaries they would like to work with when they end up working as social workers. Thus, 28.9% of the students say that they were influenced to a suitable extent, and 28.9% say that they know to a large extent which category of beneficiaries to direct their attention to, as a result of the practitioners' interventions. Definitely, to a very large extent, 21.1% say that they have clearly decided which category of beneficiaries or clients they would like to work with at the end of their professional training. There are also 15.8% of students who say that to a small (10.5%) and very small (5.3%) extent they have figured out for which category of people to provide social assistance services (**Figure 4**).



**Figure 4.** The degree of satisfaction with the online internship and the impact on the decision to practice in the social field

## Opportunities/Advantages of Online Practice

Students were asked: "What is the main reason why you think the online internship during the COVID-19 pandemic helped you?" The main advantage/opportunity of the online practice, in the view of the students, refers to the specialists and practitioners with whom they came into contact online and aims at the easy access, in a short time, to many specialists in the field and from different regions of the country and the fact that they had an optimistic, inspirational attitude from which the students felt the dedication to do their profession:

"It presented us concrete aspects about the work in different fields of activity of Social Assistance. The examples from the real life of some specialists were useful for what we are going to do".

"The online practice helped me, because through it I made a foray into many areas of social assistance."

"I had the opportunity to discover several areas of social assistance, some that I didn't even know existed."

"I received information from specialists who work with different beneficiaries, and I didn't have to travel to Cluj, Bucharest, Vaslui, etc."

"Online I've met people we wouldn't have been able to meet so easily in other contexts."

"Even if it was online, I don't think it was a problem, on the contrary, it would have been difficult anyway to be able to talk face to face with those specialists in normal times, given the distance they are from us, the experience they shared with us was a plus for us, they enriched my knowledge. I wish there were such meetings every year of college. We can learn a lot from the experience of others, especially if they work in this field".

"Meeting the specialists made the communication of information easier online, since they were not able to visit us face to face, thus the online practice came to our benefit".

"The motivation they passed on to us!"

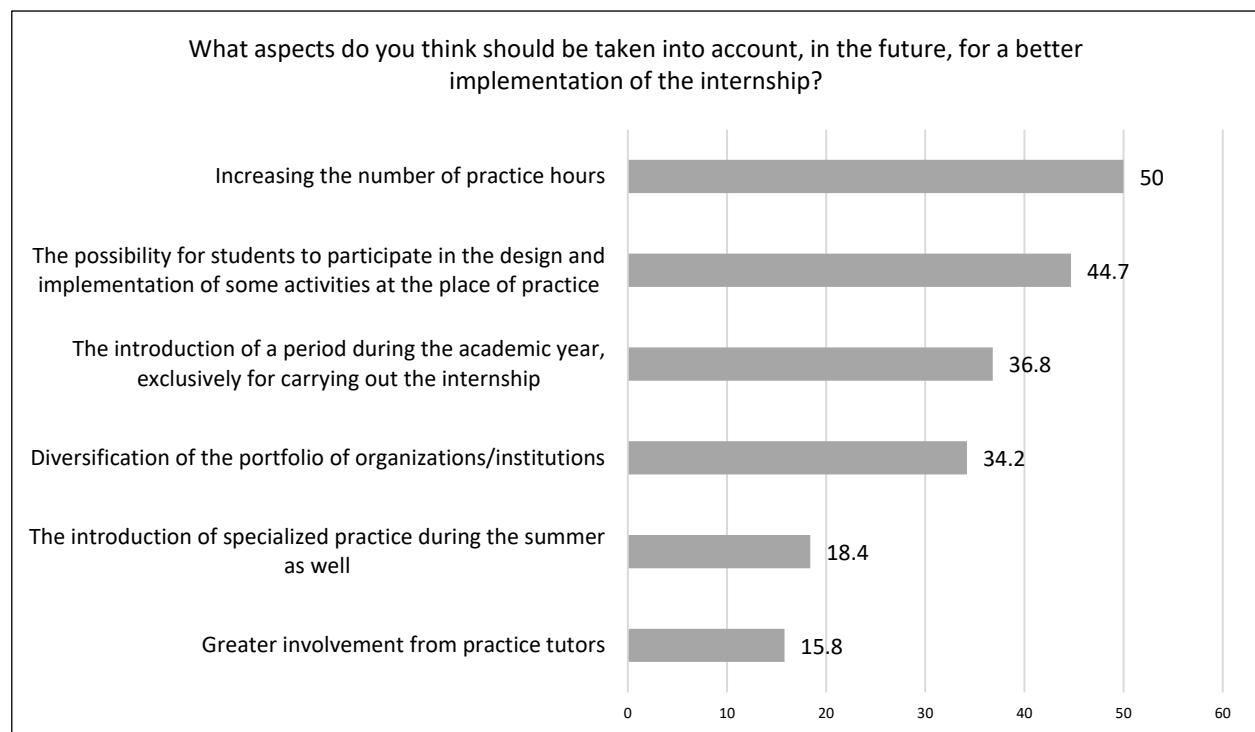
"The practice carried out online gave me the opportunity to communicate with different specialists who are very good at what they do. They shared their rich experience with us. Had we not attended such meetings, we would not have had the opportunity to learn important aspects of social work practice from such involved professionals".

"The information presented by the specialists gave me the courage to try areas I never dreamed of."

"The main reason was the openness and transparency with which our guests shared their lordships' experience."

## Aspects to Improve in the Internship

The number of practice hours provided in the education plan is not enough in the opinion of half of the students. Of these, 50% are of the opinion that the number of practice hours should be increased. Almost 20% of them would like to be able to carry out their internship or to have such an internship introduced during the summer. Students want to be more involved in the activities carried out at the practice places, so that 44.7% want the tutors at the practice places to offer them the opportunity to participate in the design and implementation of some activities at the practice place. Currently, the internship is scheduled throughout the academic year at the same time as the courses and seminars, so it is difficult for students to plan their internship hours along with the educational activity in the university. There are 36.8% of students who believe that the introduction of a period during the academic year, exclusively for carrying out the internship, would help them to a greater extent in their training as future practitioners in the field of social assistance. Although the university has established partnerships with most non-governmental organizations and institutions whose activity is to provide services in the social field, 34.2% of students would like a diversification of the current portfolio of organizations and institutions where they can carry out their internship. There are also 15.8% of students who believe that a greater involvement of tutors at practice places would help them train better as future specialists in the field of social assistance (**Figure 5**).



*Figure 5. Improving the internship*

## Disadvantages/Obstacles of Online Practice

When asked "What is the main reason you think the online internship during the COVID-19 pandemic did NOT help you?" students responded as follows. The fact of not having direct contact with the places of practice (institutions and/or NGOs), and implicitly with the beneficiaries/clients of social services and the establishment of links with specialists and practitioners represent the main disadvantages or obstacles of conducting the internship online during the COVID-19 pandemic:

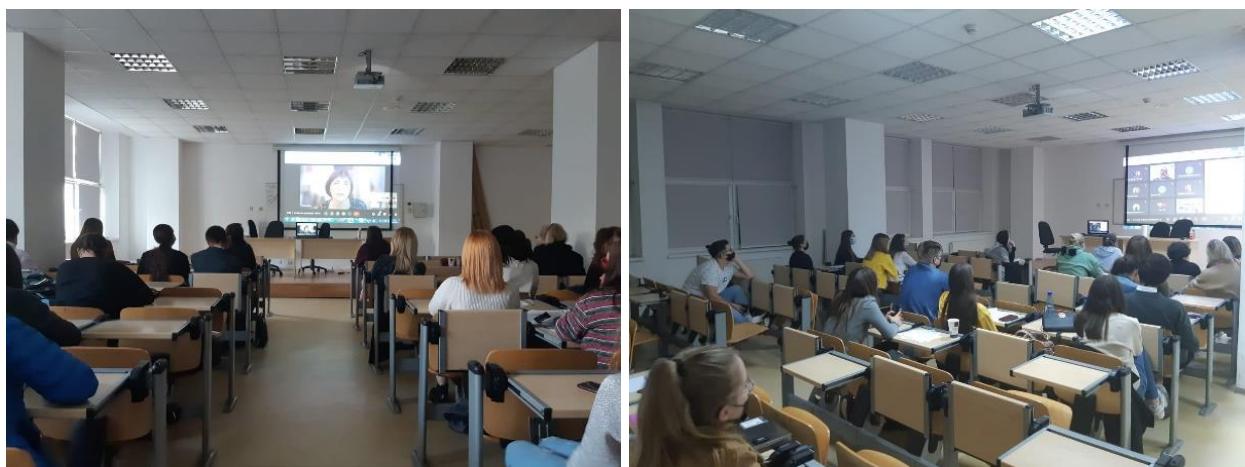
"I couldn't be present in the specific institution", "I didn't develop relationships with the specialists", "I couldn't communicate with the beneficiaries". "Because I did not interact with the beneficiaries, nor could I participate in the processes that take place in an institution."

"Although online practice has come with advantages, it also has certain weaknesses because we need us, students to experience, not just listen and share certain experiences. Practicing in institutions gives us the opportunity to come into direct contact with both professionals and beneficiaries. When the practical classes were conducted online, we couldn't learn about the importance of teamwork, and how we should behave concretely with the beneficiaries. I believe that it is extremely important for us students to really feel through our own experience what the profession of social worker really means".

Among the reasons given by the students, there is also the poor internet connection that occurred at times during the 14 weeks of practice:

"The practice stage helped me, but there were also some internet problems, it's much easier when you talk to a person face to face", "Sometimes it was hard because of the connection and the situation to be able to get along with the teacher and vice versa".

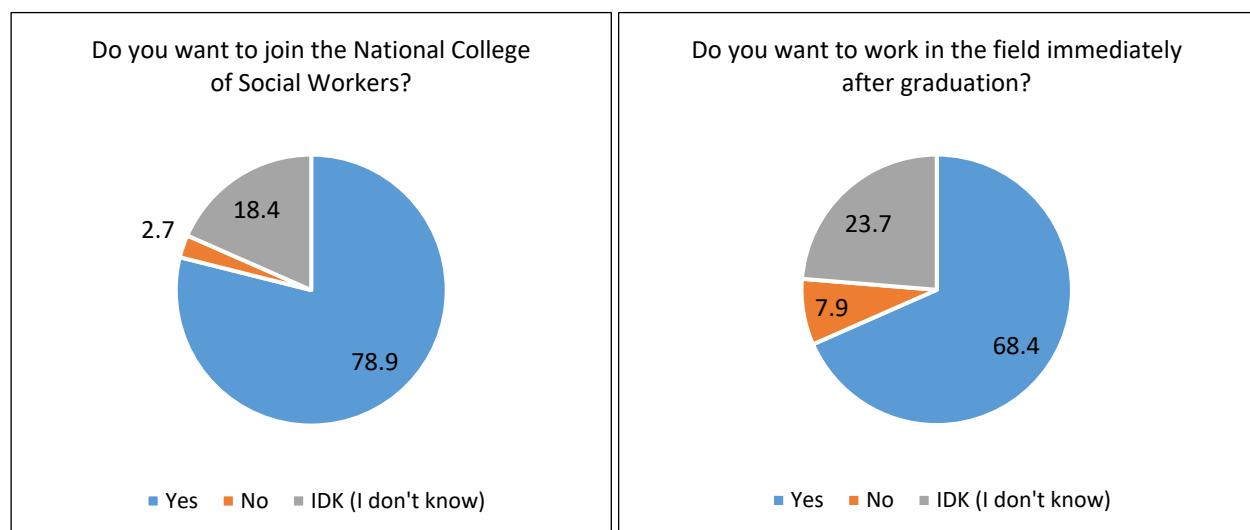
Also, some students noticed the lack of applicability of the online practice: "*What didn't help me is that they weren't very practical. So, there was too much theory.*"



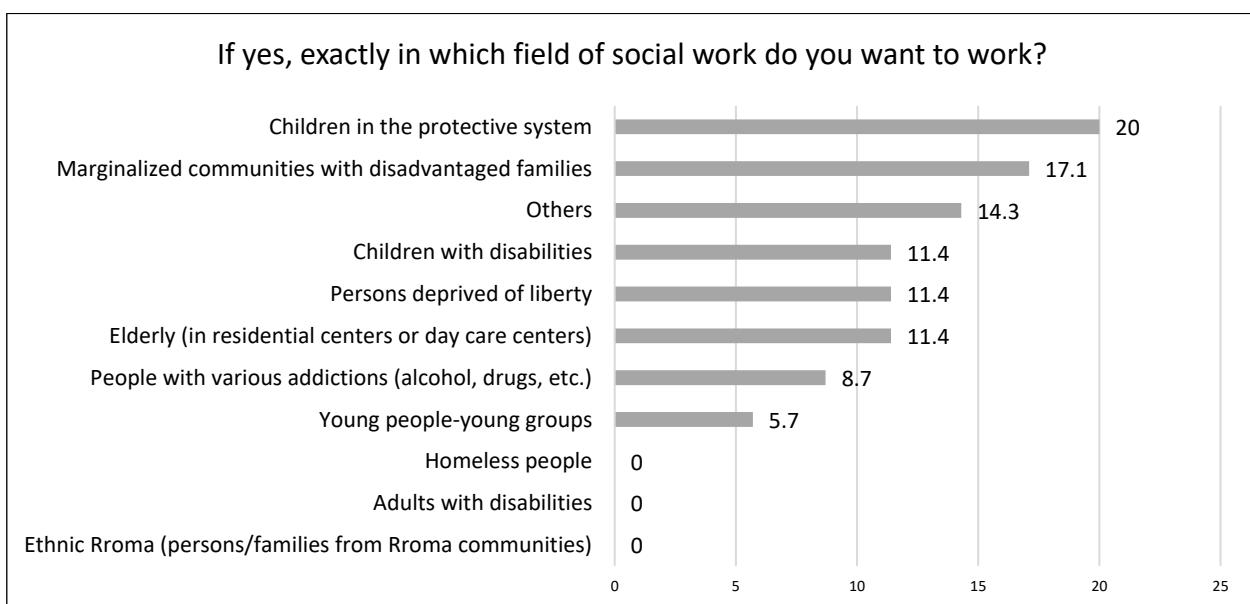
**Figure 6. Images from the Online Specialist Practice Program,  
October 2021-February 2022, Suceava, Romania**

## Plans of Working in the Social Work Field

We also intended to find out the students' intention to join the only professional association in Romania in the field of social assistance and to what extent students want to work immediately after graduation in the field of social assistance. Most of them, i.e., 78.9%, want to register as members of the professional association called the National College of Social Workers in Romania (CNASR), and 68.4% intend to work in the field immediately after graduation. The percentage of those who do not want to work in the field or are not yet sure is higher compared to the percentage of those who do not want or do not know for sure if they want to enroll in CNASR (Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Intention to join a professional organization and work in the field*



*Figure 8. The category of beneficiaries they want to work for*

Regarding the categories of beneficiaries for whom they would like to provide social assistance services, 20% of students say they would like to work with and for children from the special protection system, followed by 17.1% of respondents who would like to work in marginalized communities with disadvantaged families. There are 14.3% of students who say that they would like to work with and for families in need, others say that with any category of beneficiaries, refugees, or victims of domestic violence. In equal proportion, with 11.4% of the students, the following were mentioned in their preferences regarding the professional activity for which they would like to work: children with disabilities, persons deprived of liberty and the elderly in residential centers or in day care centers. A smaller percentage of students are those who say they would prefer to work with young people in youth centers (5.7%) and for people with various addictions (alcohol, drugs), 8.7% of students choosing this category of beneficiary or customers (**Figure 8**).

## Discussions and Conclusions

Social work students' internship carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic took place online, but for the students it was a unique experience in which, in a relatively short period of time, they came into online contact with specialist practitioners from all over the country. Most students, 92.1%, regarded the internship with online guests helpful, and consider that this experience was: pleasant, interesting, beneficial, unique, moreover it was an experience which provided a lot of information. Also, in high proportion, 89.5% consider themselves satisfied and only 10% are not satisfied with the online internship. Among the respondents, 21.1% have clearly decided which category of beneficiaries or clients they would like to work with at the end of their professional training. Half of the students believe that the number of practice hours a student must do over the years of study should be increased, including the introduction of a summer internship and a period during the academic year exclusively for specialized practice. They also want to be involved to a greater extent in the design and implementation of some activities at the practice sites. The lack of direct contact with places of practice and, implicitly, the lack of direct contact with beneficiaries or clients of social services is the biggest disadvantage of online practice during the pandemic. The session on the role of the social worker in rural communities was the most interesting topic addressed according to the students. Moreover, 17.1% of them want to work in marginalized communities, with disadvantaged families. This is encouraging considering that a report (Lazar et al., 2020) showed that there is a need to increase the number of social workers recruited in social services

(especially in rural areas and in disadvantaged communities). Most want to enroll in the National College of Social Workers in Romania, and 68.4% intend to work in the field immediately after graduation.

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# Challenges and Benefits of Using Online Tools for Developing Competences for Democratic Culture

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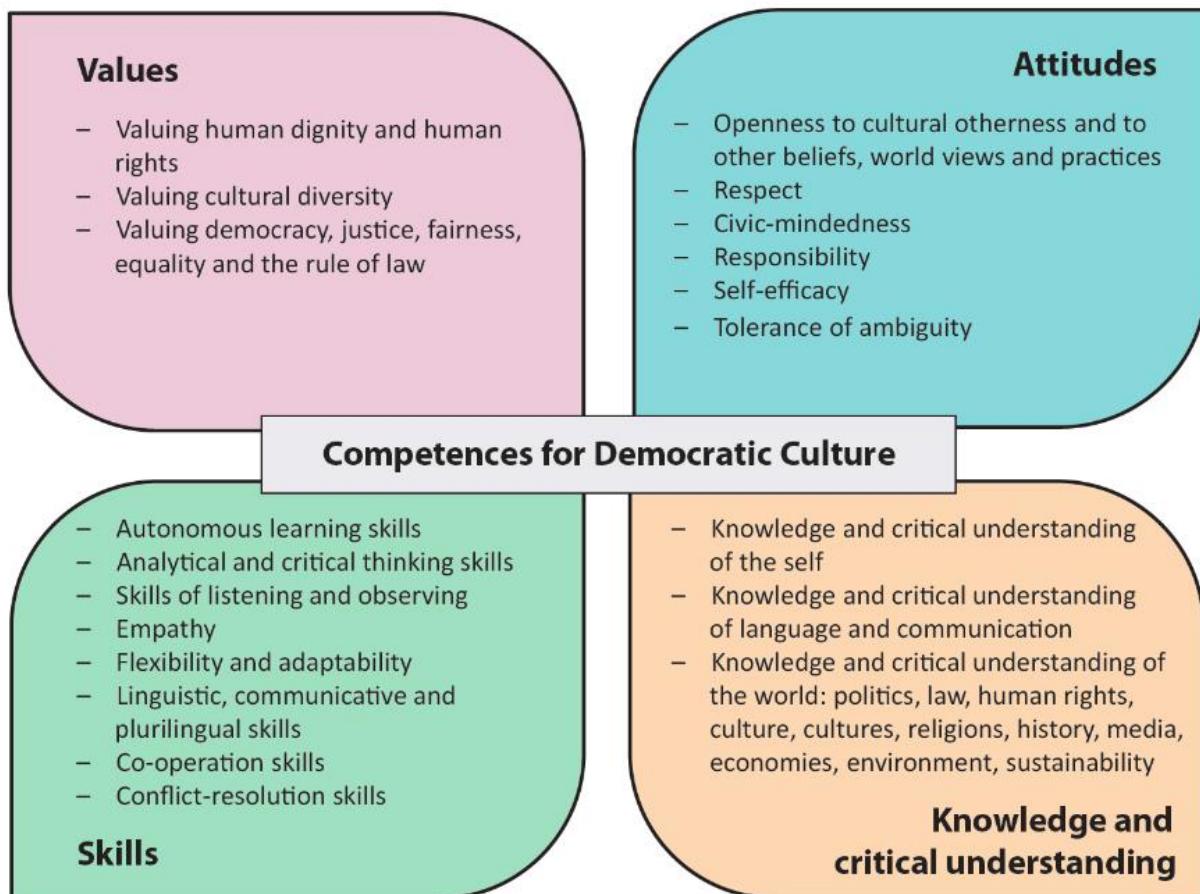
**ABSTRACT:** The paper provides an analysis of how online tools can be used as part of virtual or blended learning environments for developing the competences included in Council of Europe's Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture. It is based on the outcomes of two EU-funded projects involving the Intercultural Institute of Timisoara as partner. It is argued that for both formal education, even from an early age, and for training with adults, it is possible, under certain conditions, to design meaningful and effective learning experiences using online tools that contribute to the development of the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge and critical understanding included in the model of competences for democratic culture.

## Competences for Democratic Culture – A Challenge for Education

The Reference Framework of Competences for Democratic Culture (RFCDC) has been developed by the Council of Europe (2018) around a model of competences that include the elements of competence that citizens need in a society characterized by a democratic culture. The model consists of values, attitudes, skills and knowledge and critical understanding, as illustrated in the diagram below.

As competences for democratic culture refer to much more than acquisition of knowledge, the RFCDC argues that they cannot be developed by simply exposing people to information, and that interactive methods are necessary. Moreover, the RFCDC argues that the connection of learners with the values is more effective when it involves interactions in a climate that reflects these values, and when the facilitators of the learning process (teachers, trainers, etc.) illustrate these values in their behaviors during the teaching and learning processes and beyond them. This paper provides some arguments for the idea that this need for interactive learning activities and for a climate of learning

that values human rights and human dignity, equality, fairness, justice, and cultural diversity can be satisfied also in online and blended learning settings, under certain conditions.



*Figure 1. The model of competences for democratic culture*

## Developing Competences for Democratic Culture with Online Tools in Primary School

The team of the EU-funded Erasmus+ project Digital Destiny (2023) analyzed the perceptions and practices of primary school teachers regarding the use of online tools and piloted pedagogical strategies that aim at developing some of the competences for democratic culture in primary school, with a focus on sustainable development and age-relevant societal issues. It confirmed that it is possible and effective to develop analytical and critical thinking skills, together with cooperation and communication skills, as well as attitudes such as responsibility and civic mindedness by using interactive learning activities that rely on a variety of online tools and resources. The use of these tools is

recommended, not only as part of online learning activities, but also during classroom activities, connected with different topics and subject matters.

Moreover, Digital Destiny (2023) proposes an innovative approach for developing a wide range of competences for democratic culture, including values and attitudes, through more complex and structured learning processes combining the use of digital stories, Design Thinking, and project-based learning activities. An advantage of activities focused on developing stories or on discussions and reflections on stories is that they can also develop empathy and stimulate awareness of the importance of values (Bratitsis, 2018).

## **Developing Competences for Democratic Culture Through Online Non-Formal Education**

A survey of the experiences of 65 education specialists from different European countries done as part of the Erasmus+ project Digiversity (2023) reveals interesting experiences and perceptions of online non-formal learning related to the competences for democratic culture.

According to the responses, the consensus was that when designing and facilitating an online training it is not sufficient to take an in-person course and move it online. Online training is not seen as better or worse than residential training, but another way of learning, with its own strengths and weaknesses.

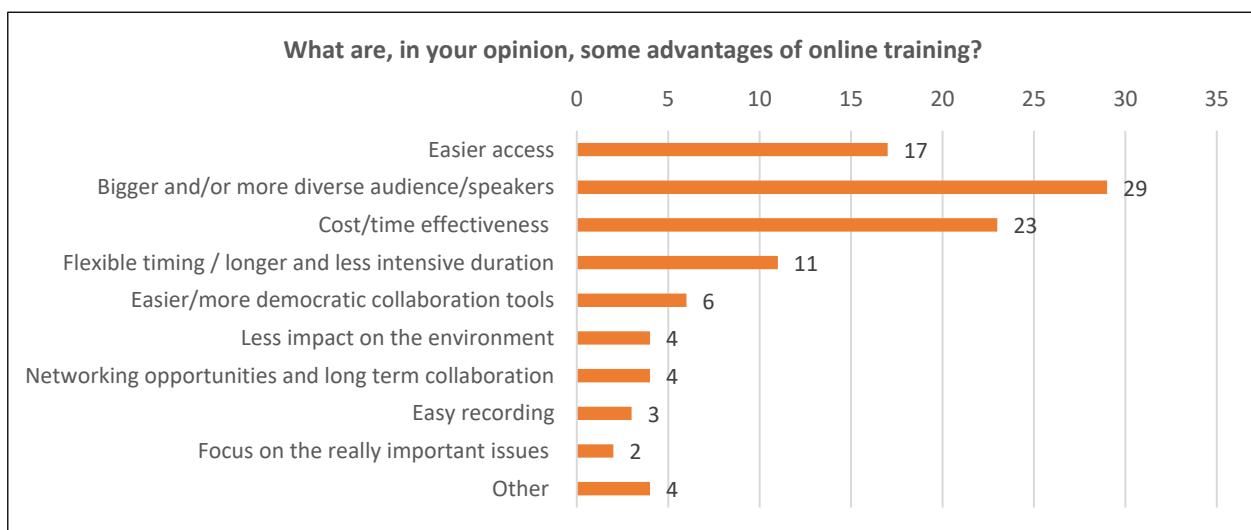
Many respondents consider that it is very important to ensure that the experience is engaging. The following aspects are seen as the most relevant for creating meaningful online experiences: choosing the right tools, allowing time to create an online flow (taking into account that each additional tool might imply risks) and a safe learning environment, ensuring digital inclusion, use of interactive methods and group work (even more than during in-person trainings), not overwhelming participants with information, using language that embodies diversity in a respectful way, bridging between digital cultures and competences and continuously collecting (anonymous) feedback and adapting accordingly.

The trainers consulted also offered specific suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of developing competences for democratic culture through online:

- Discuss the ground rules in the beginning of the training;
- Use tools that are available to all participants;
- Dedicate enough time to breaking the ice, creating a sense of group and a safe space;

- Share bios and pictures of participants before the training;
- Ask participants to keep their cameras open;
- Keep theoretical inputs at 15 minutes or less, limit the use of slides and use brief videos;
- Take into account the size of the group: it is more difficult to engage everyone in larger groups;
- Include practical tasks in small groups, in breakout rooms;
- Give assignments, such as: “grab something from your room and show it to the group” and use tools (i.e., polls) that require participants' active interaction;

Some respondents expressed doubts about the power of online learning, related to the difficulty to hold participants' attention, to measure the level of participation or to have a quick reaction due to the low level of non-verbal elements of interaction.

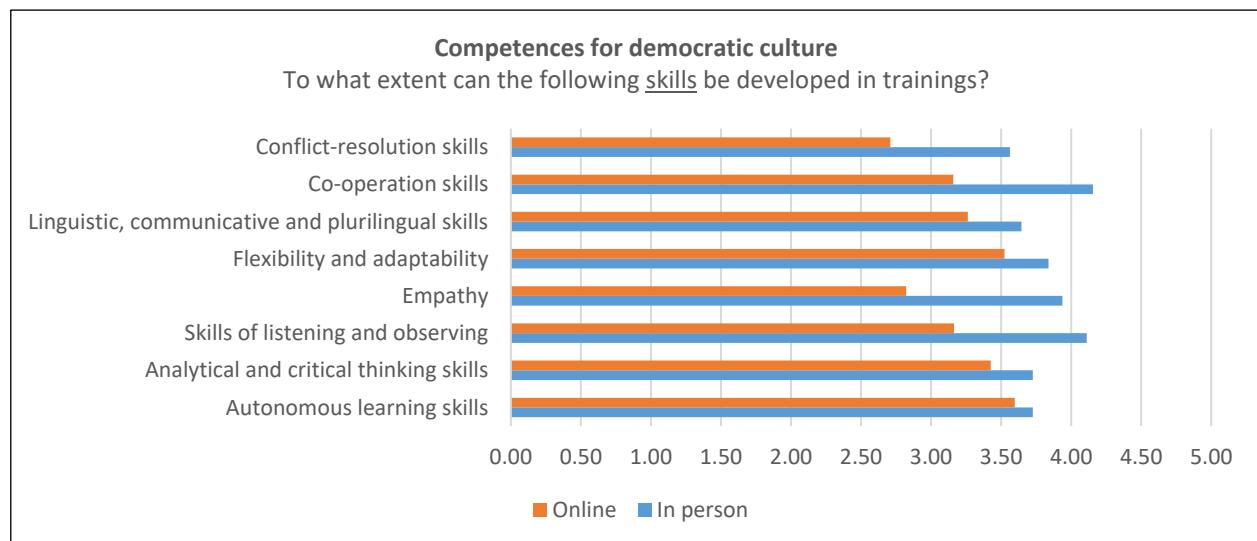


*Figure 2. The advantages of online training identified by the questionnaire respondents*

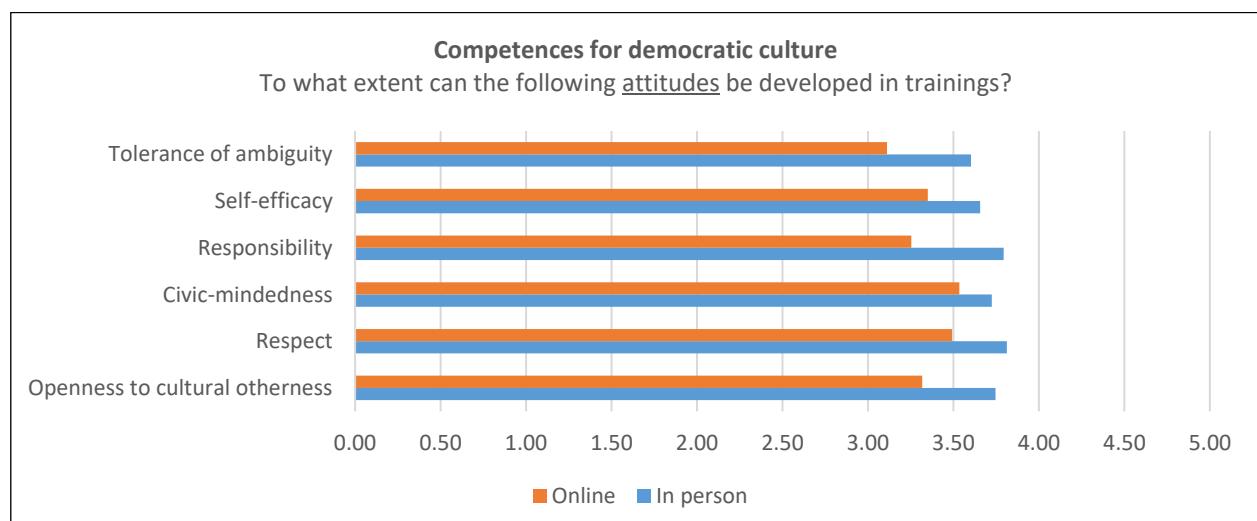
The main advantages of online learning identified by the respondents relate to the possibility of engaging bigger and/or more diverse audiences and speakers and the possibility of reaching people with disabilities, people who cannot travel, people who are shy, international groups, people who need visas, marginalized groups, etc. Many respondents mentioned the fact the online trainings are easier to access as they reduce travel time and can ensure participation of people who cannot travel but can attend online. Combining synchronous with asynchronous sessions can lead to more meaningful trainings that integrate the real-life environment, allow people to learn at their own pace, review recordings and documents multiple times, and plan the training over weeks or even months, rather than the intensive few days of residential training. It is considered that online training can offer tools that increase collaboration and ensure a more democratic participation, while also creating networking opportunities among people with very diverse backgrounds. The fact that the connection between the participants

started online might increase the chance of maintaining contact and collaborating, especially if collaboration tools are introduced during the training.

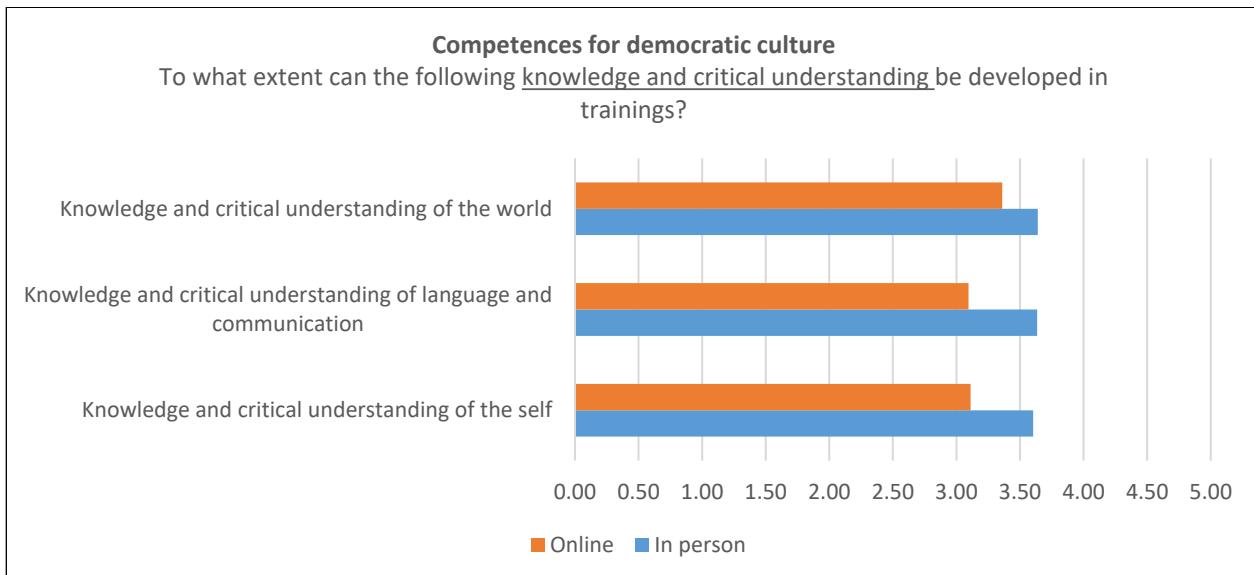
The respondents were asked to rate the extent to which competences for democratic culture can be developed in online training and in residential training. The comparative graphs are presented in figures 3, 4, 5 and 6. The results show that in all the cases the respondents considered that residential training has a higher chance of contributing to the development of competences for democratic culture. However, the difference is very small, with a few exceptions mainly related to skills such as conflict resolution, cooperation, and empathy. The smallest difference is in the case of autonomous learning skills, which some respondents consider to be better developed online, in line with other research (Brown et al., 2022).



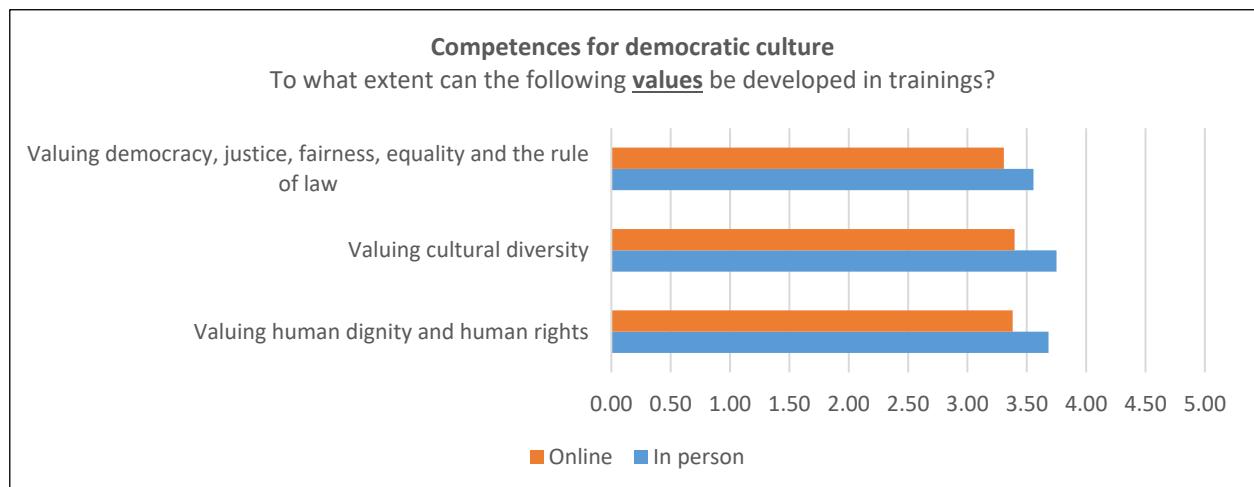
**Figure 3.** Competences for democratic culture: the extent to which skills can be developed in online and in residential trainings



**Figure 4.** Competences for democratic culture: the extent to which attitudes can be developed in online and in residential trainings



**Figure 5.** Competences for democratic culture: the extent to which knowledge and critical understanding can be developed in online and in residential trainings



**Figure 6.** Competences for democratic culture: the extent to which values can be developed in online and in residential trainings

Respondents to the survey, who are experienced trainers in both face to face and online formats, consider that tolerance of ambiguity and responsibility are the attitudes harder to develop online, but they also report similar scores for online and face- to-face training in the case of the values.

## Conclusions

Both teachers who piloted online learning tools as part of a blended learning approach with primary school students (Digital Destiny, 2023) and trainers working with adults and young people both online and face-to-face formats (Digiversity, 2023) confirm that, under certain conditions, competences for democratic culture can be effectively

developed by using online tools. In some cases, the effectiveness is enhanced by the online tools, while in others additional efforts are needed to obtain similar results with those generated by face-to-face learning. Developing values and attitudes can be effective online if a climate compatible with these values is actively promoted by teachers or trainers throughout the whole process. In addition, using online learning tools brings significant benefits, both practical and in terms of learning outcomes, making their use relevant as part of mainstream educational strategies, and not just a forced alternative, when face to face education is not possible. Further research is needed to identify more concretely which tools and methods are most effective in maximizing the benefits and minimizing the challenges in the development of various clusters of competences for democratic culture (CoE, 2018) for specific age levels.

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# WORK PERFORMANCE IN PANDEMIC TIMES. TIMIȘ COUNTY – STUDY CASE

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**ABSTRACT:** Work performance is a matter of interest for both organizations and employees. While at the organizational level, the need for high-performing employees means increased productivity, competitiveness, and therefore achievement of objectives, at the individual level high - performance results in employee satisfaction and professional development. The concept is multidimensional and relates to a variety of dimensions such as task performance, contextual performance, counterproductive work behavior, adaptive performance, motivation, emotional distress, and many others. At the educational level, teachers play a defining role in shaping and forming individuals through their performance, interest, and passion, so we can assume that the performance of teachers determines the performance of the entire education system. The present study was conducted on 172 participants and aims to explore work performance among teachers in public schools in the Western region of the country in relation to activities carried out during the pandemic period. The approach is quantitative, based on a questionnaire involving the application of the IWPQ scale (Koopmans et al., 2014), to which are added topic-specific questions and socio-demographic variables. The questionnaire was applied online with the support of the Timis County School Inspectorate, using the QuestionPro platform. The sample is a convenience one, and the results represent only a general picture of the situation in the pandemic, without being generalizable to the entire population of teachers in Timis County.

## Introduction

### *Definitions*

Despite the importance and prevalence of Individual Work Performance (IWP), a clear definition and framework are lacking across various research areas. While numerous tools exist to measure IWP, the absence of consensus on its definition, conceptualization, and measurement hinders interventions and the improvement of its strategies (Escorpizo, 2008; Schultz et al., 2009; Cancelliere et al., 2011).

Multiple terms, such as presenteeism, performance, and productivity, are commonly interchanged to refer to individual work performance (IWP). Yet, their definitions often lack clarity. This absence of precision poses an issue, as a well-established conceptual framework for IWP is imperative for precise measurement and an effective evaluation. Consequently, precise measurement becomes crucial for accurately pinpointing the origins and outcomes of IWP.

Developing a succinct and comprehensive measurement of Individual Work Performance (IWP) begins with its definition and conceptualization. The definition of job performance most frequently referenced, as proposed by Campbell, McHenry, and Wise (1990), elucidates that job performance encompasses “behaviors or actions aligned with organizational objectives”. A cohesive framework introduces four primary dimensions: task performance, contextual performance, adaptive performance, and counterproductive work behavior.

This definition is rooted in three concepts highlighted by Viswesvaran and Ones (2000) and reiterated by Motowidlo (2003):

- Job performance is defined as a behavior or action, not as a result.
- Job performance only includes behavior relevant to organizational goals.
- Job performance is a multidimensional concept.

### *The importance of work performance*

The concept of individual work performance is currently a prominent and relevant topic. Its significance is evident not only in everyday work environments but also in widespread media coverage. Moreover, it holds significance across various academic disciplines, including occupational health, organizational psychology, management, and economics (Koopmans, 2014).

The increased interest in individual work performance stems from labor market trends. One aspect involves economic globalization, marked by the amplified cross-border exchange of goods, services, technology, and capital, consequently intensifying competition among global corporations (Joshi, 2009). One aspect involves economic globalization, marked by the amplified cross-border exchange of goods, services, technology, and capital, intensifying competition among global corporations. Hence, organizations must uphold and enhance their competitive prowess. Individual work performance is crucial for both team and organizational efficacy, thereby enhancing overall productivity and competitive edge (Koopmans, 2014).

Another aspect, during an economic recession marked by reduced economic activity, the importance of individual work performance is magnified. Merriam-Webster's

Collegiate Dictionary online characterizes this recession through factors like excessive product supply, diminished global trade, increasing debts, bankruptcies, rising unemployment rates, and declining consumer confidence (accessed on 21.08.2023). Organizations respond to this economic challenge by adopting cost-cutting strategies, including downsizing and outsourcing. Consequently, employees are motivated to enhance their individual work performance to bolster overall company effectiveness and productivity. Additionally, this drive to improve individual work performance stems from the aspiration to have better chances of surviving potential personnel reductions amid reorganization efforts (Koopmans, 2014).

Furthermore, in the context of sustainable employability, the importance of individual work performance becomes evident. The trend of a rapidly expanding older workforce contrasts with a diminishing younger workforce, potentially leading to labor shortages (United Nations, 2008). This necessitates a smaller workforce managing similar or increased workloads, while also addressing escalating expenses associated with an aging population, encompassing pensions, social security, and healthcare (World Health Organization, 2009). Improving individual work performance is pivotal in this context. Moreover, with the rising retirement age, older workers will have to uphold or exceed their present levels of individual work performance, despite potential age-related constraints like declining health (European Commission, 2010).

## Work Performance

### *Organization and employees*

Individual work performance is an important outcome measure in both business and research (Dåderman et al., 2020), and a matter of interest for both organizations and employees.

High-performing individuals are essential for organizations to attain goals, boost productivity, and enhance competitiveness (Sonnenstag & Frese, 2002). Enhanced performance aligns with increased efficiency, effectiveness, and superior work quality (Goodhue & Thompson, 1995).

As per human resource management (HRM) principles, an organization's enhanced performance results from the quality of its workforce. Thus, employees are acknowledged as valuable resources that enhance overall performance (Nor, 2018).

Prior to the late 20th century, performance was associated with a mix of aptitude and motivation, contingent on adequate resources. This contributed to the recognition of

motivating individuals as a pivotal component in the realm of management practices (Zhenjing et al., 2022).

Optimal utilization of human resources can lead to unlimited productivity, efficiency, and performance in a business. Individual working styles vary among employees, with some naturally excelling and others benefiting from time to time of occasional motivation (Meng & Berger, 2019; Berberoglu, 2018).

The performance of employees depends on their readiness and receptiveness to fulfill job duties. When employees demonstrate this willingness and openness, their productivity has the potential to rise, consequently boosting overall performance (Raziq & Maulabakhsh, 2015).

The effectiveness of employees, equipment, and supplies depends on the provision of necessary resources, regardless of individual expertise (Zhenjing et al., 2022). Performance appraisal significantly impacts emotionally charged tasks and the evaluation of commitment and competence (Narcisse & Harcourt, 2008). Scholars emphasize the importance of a well-defined performance analysis framework for an organization's success (Olson et al., 2018). A central challenge for businesses is enhancing employee performance while maintaining authenticity (Ho et al., 2021). How performance evaluation can distinguish excellent from poor employees is a key query. Moreover, gaps persist in vital variables within performance assessment models, contributing to the absence of an integrated approach (Moslemi et al., 2019).

A healthy work climate encompasses physical and behavioral elements. Physical factors relate to employees' presence at work, while behavioral aspects influence their conduct. The workplace environment significantly influences employees' motivation, efficiency, and performance, impacting their willingness to remain motivated, creative, engaged, and loyal (Hafeez et al., 2019). Researchers suggest that this relationship with the workplace environment has both positive and negative effects (Zhenjing et al., 2022).

Therefore, at the organizational level, the need for high-performing employees means increased productivity, competitiveness, and therefore achievement of objectives. At the individual level, high performance results in employee satisfaction and professional development (Sonnenstag et al., 2008).

### ***Work performance and other areas***

Job satisfaction, job attitudes, personality, motivation, leadership, and, to a lesser degree, group processes and organizational design, stand out as extensively researched precursors of job performance.

The concept of work performance is multidimensional (Campbell, 1990) and relates to a variety of dimensions, but the most frequently used to describe the concept are:

- task performance;
- contextual performance;
- counterproductive work behavior (incorporating expressions of discontent, engaging in actions that jeopardize the organization, misusing information, squandering time and resources, displaying unsafe conduct, and exhibiting subpar work quality);
- adaptive performance (Koopmans, 2014).

Task performance refers to proficiency in performing essential job tasks (Campbell, 1990).

Contextual performance refers to behaviors that support the organizational environment (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997).

Counterproductive work behavior refers to harmful actions within an organization (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002).

Adaptive performance pertains to an individual's capacity to adapt to shifts in work roles or systems. This involves innovative problem-solving, managing uncertainties, acquiring new skills, technologies, and procedures, and adjusting to varied individuals, cultures, or surroundings (Griffin et al., 2007).

### ***Work performance in general***

Numerous studies have been carried out regarding work performance and some of them focus only on the phenomenon of performance that is studied at the individual level, a group, referring to a specific category of population or to employees in a general way, as well as studies that correlate the mentioned phenomenon of interest with other concepts such as wellbeing, stress, burnout, work engagement, training, motivation, emotional distress, emotional intelligence, feedback, planning, behavior, goal setting, self-efficacy, goals, task strategies, task interest and many others.

More than that, multiple scientific fields provide a range of approaches to address work performance. Occupational health employs risk assessments and interventions for employee well-being, work, and organizational psychology focuses on personnel aspects, and management and economics address broader work systems including procedures, technology, and organization (Koopmans, 2014).

Koopmans (2014) also mentions that it is important to distinguish work performance from work productivity, as these terms are often interchanged in literature.

Defined by Kemppila (2003) as input divided by output, work productivity is a more specific concept than work performance.

### ***Work performance in teaching***

Teaching stands as one of the most esteemed professions globally, with teachers serving as role models who are actively emulated (Usop et al., 2013). At the educational level, teachers play a defining role in shaping and forming individuals through their performance, interest, and passion, so we can assume that the performance of teachers determines the performance of the entire education system.

Teachers are at the core of any educational system and represent a nation's backbone. They cultivate distinctive performance-style traits based on their cognitive and perceptual interactions with the world. This prompts individuals to behave in ways that optimize their abilities. Moreover, a teacher's favorable outlook on teaching and elevated aspirations influences their positive outlook on their surroundings.

There are studies that present the teachers in the context of work performance. One aspect emphasizes the comprehensive job satisfaction of teachers, spanning various domains such as policies, supervision, compensation, relationships, growth prospects, working conditions, achievement, recognition, and responsibility. The research underscores how a satisfied teaching workforce bolsters the efficiency and competitiveness of the teaching-learning process (Usop et al., 2013).

## **Methodology**

The present study was conducted on 172 participants and aims to explore work performance among teachers in public schools in the Western region of the country in relation to activities carried out during the pandemic period.

### ***Objectives***

After applying the standard scale, strong internal consistency is observed within each of the three dimensions. Moreover, all items remain relevant when considering the new context and a specific population from a different cultural background.

Measuring the workplace performance of pre-university teachers. Conducting educational activities in a novel context and under substantially different conditions can notably impact individuals' emotions and their perception of the workplace. Consequently, work performance, encompassing task performance, behaviors

contributing to the organizational environment, and detrimental actions within the organization, might diverge from the usual circumstances.

### ***Hypotheses***

H1: There are different significant statistics between pre-university education employees from the rural environment and those from the urban environment in terms of work performance.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between the age of the respondents and the dimension of the work performance concept.

H3: There are statistically significant differences between teachers with temporary status and full teachers in terms of work performance.

H4: There are statistically significant differences in the comparison of the averages of each dimension of the concept of work performance and the categories of teaching staff according to the teaching degree.

### ***Research tool***

Numerous tools assess individual work performance (IWP), yet current instruments lack comprehensive coverage (Koopmans, 2015). Additionally, these tools target specific populations, hindering their broad research applicability (Koopmans, 2014). Thus, a solution to this issue is the development of the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) (Koopmans et al., 2014) to address existing instrument limitations.

Even if the present research has as its target group people who are part of the same professional category, i.e., teaching staff, to develop this research, we used the scale from the mentioned questionnaire (IWPQ scale) to which are added specific questions and socio-demographic variables.

This scale is adapted to be able to provide answers to questions related to the involvement of teachers in the educational activities that took place during the pandemic period, so it is completed with additional questions through which we capture aspects related to this period.

The research employs a quantitative approach, and the tool was administered to teachers online through the Question Pro platform, with the facilitation of the Timiș County School Inspectorate, the sample being a convenience one.

The instrument is based on the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire Scale (IWPQ; Koopmans et al., 2014), and contains three major dimensions (task performance,

contextual performance, and counterproductive work behavior). Over time, the scale experienced changes, and the one we're using has a total of 27 items as follows: TP - 7 items, CP - 12 items, and CWB - 8 items.

Task performance: I managed to plan my work so that it was done on time; My planning was optimal; I kept in mind the results that I had to achieve in my work; I was able to separate main issues from side issues at work; I knew how to set the right priorities; I was able to perform my work well with minimal time and effort; Collaboration with others was very productive.

Contextual performance: I took on extra responsibilities; I started new tasks myself, when my old ones were finished; I took on challenging work tasks, when available; I worked at keeping my job knowledge up-to-date; I worked at keeping my job skills up-to-date; I came up with creative solutions to new problems; I kept looking for new challenges in my job; I did more than was expected of me; I actively participated in work meetings; I actively looked for ways to improve my performance at work; I grasped opportunities when they presented themselves; I knew how to solve difficult situations and setbacks quickly.

Counterproductive work behavior: I complained about unimportant matters at work; I made problems greater than they were at work; I focused on the negative aspects of a work situation, instead of on the positive aspects; I spoke with colleagues about the negative aspects of my work; I spoke with people from outside the organization about the negative aspects of my work; I did less than was expected of me; I managed to get off from a work task easily; I sometimes did nothing, while I should have been working.

### *Population*

The target population of the study comprises individuals working as pre-university teachers in school institutions located in Timiș County. This includes teachers of varying didactic levels, educational experience, the curriculum taught, school environments. The only requirement is that they have taught during the pandemic period.

We ensured representation from both genders and various age groups among the respondents.

The average age of the 172 participants is 47.7 years, of which according to the origin, 76.16% are from the urban environment, and 23.84% from the countryside, and according by gender, 78.49% are female respondents, and 21.51% are male respondents.

## Results

Following the exploratory factor analysis, the contextual performance (CP) dimension was split into two factors: proactive behavior and self-development, which we believe better reflect the reality emerging from the data.

If initially the dimension titled 'contextual performance' contained 12 items, following the completion of exploratory factor analysis, based on factor loading, 5 items (Q4.1, Q4.2, Q4.3, Q4.6, Q4.8) were assigned to the first new dimension 'proactive behavior', 4 items (Q4.4, Q4.5, Q4.10, Q4.12) were assigned to the second new dimension 'self-development', and three of the items (Q4.7, Q4.9, Q4.11) were removed due to registering similar loadings in both factors.

Factor 1 was comprised of 5 items reported on a 5-point Likert scale that explained 50.209% of the variance with factor loadings from .640 to .880.

Factor 2 was comprised of 4 items reported on a 5-point Likert scale that explained 8.712% of the variance with factor loadings from .460 to .916.

Communalities ranged from .39 to .75.

The exploratory factor analysis of the contextual performance - dimension of the IWPQ scale was conducted using the principal component analysis method of extraction, with the Direct Oblimin with Kaiser rotation method.

The other two initial dimensions (task performance and counterproductive work behavior) were unchanged, so they were kept as in the original version.

The results obtained indicate high values of the positive dimensions: task performance (TP)  $M=4.35$ , proactive behavior  $M=4.15$ , self-development  $M=4.44$ , and the dimension targeting counterproductive work behavior (CWB) obtained a mean of  $M=1.99$ .

The high scores on all dimensions may lead to the conclusion that self-perceived performance was not influenced by pandemic conditions.

**Table 1.** *Communalities for Exploratory Factor Analysis of the Contextual performance scale of the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) (N = 172)*

Item No.	Items	Communalities
Q4.1	I took on extra responsibilities.	.650
Q4.2	I started new tasks myself, when my old ones were finished.	.580
Q4.3	I took on challenging work tasks, when available.	.677
Q4.4	I worked at keeping my job knowledge up-to-date.	.750
Q4.5	I worked at keeping my job skills up-to-date.	.730
Q4.6	I came up with creative solutions to new problems.	.539
Q4.7	I kept looking for new challenges in my job.	.550
Q4.8	I did more than was expected of me.	.616
Q4.9	I actively participated in work meetings.	.450

Item No.	Items	Communalities
Q4.10	I actively looked for ways to improve my performance at work.	.638
Q4.11	I grasped opportunities when they presented themselves.	.488
Q4.12	I knew how to solve difficult situations and setbacks quickly.	.390

**Table 2. Pattern Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis of Contextual performance scale of the Individual Work Performance Questionnaire (IWPQ) (N = 172)**

Item No.	Items	Factor	
		1	2
Q4.1	I took on extra responsibilities.	.880	
Q4.2	I started new tasks myself, when my old ones were finished.	.686	
Q4.3	I took on challenging work tasks, when available.	.827	
Q4.4	I worked at keeping my job knowledge up-to-date.		.916
Q4.5	I worked at keeping my job skills up-to-date.		.890
Q4.6	I came up with creative solutions to new problems.	.640	
Q4.7	I kept looking for new challenges in my job.	.507	.320
Q4.8	I did more than was expected of me.	.830	
Q4.9	I actively participated in work meetings.	.440	.310
Q4.10	I actively looked for ways to improve my performance at work.	.329	.560
Q4.11	I grasped opportunities when they presented themselves.	.360	.420
Q4.12	I knew how to solve difficult situations and setbacks quickly.	.460	

In the study, comparisons of performance levels were made across different categories of respondents (male and female, teachers who practice their profession in rural and urban schools, teachers with different age, professional status – substitute and full professor and the teaching degree). Regarding the status of teachers, 80.81% of the respondents are full professors, while 19.19% are substitute professors.

If we are referring to the professional development in the teaching career, 57.36% of the respondents are at the maximum professional level (the first degree), 14.53% have the second degree, 18.80% have the first step in the hierarchy of the teaching degree and 9.30% don't have any degree, they can be debutants - in their first years in the educational system. To be able to test the working hypotheses and the research objectives, the means were calculated for each of the four dimensions obtained after the confirmatory factor analysis (TP, M=4.35; PB, M=4.15; SD, M=4.44; CWB, M, =1.99).

With the help of the values obtained, the T-Test will be performed to test if there are significant differences between teachers who work in rural areas and those who work in urban areas in terms of the four dimensions of the concept of work performance.

The hypothesis asserting that the teaching environment significantly contributes to changes in work performance was examined using the independent samples T-Test. For the task performance dimension t (170) =.684, for p=.495>0.05, the work performance of

those who work in rural areas ( $M=4.40$ ,  $SD=.528$ ) is approximately equal to that of those who work in the urban environment ( $M=4.34$ ,  $SD=.544$ ). So, it follows that the hypothesis is denied.

For the proactive behavior dimension  $t(170)=.626$ , for  $p=.904>0.05$ , the proactive behavior of teachers who teach in rural areas ( $M=4.21$ ,  $SD=.711$ ) is similar to that of teachers who teach in the urban environment ( $M=4.14$ ,  $SD=.700$ ).

For the self-development dimension  $t(170)=.897$ , for  $p=.834>0.05$ , the behavior and actions oriented towards the own development of rural teachers ( $M=4.50$ ,  $SD=.540$ ) do not differ from the behavior of urban teachers ( $M=4.42$ ,  $SD=.504$ ).

For the counterproductive work behavior dimension  $t(170)=-1.035$ , for  $p=.542$ , the counterproductive work behavior of rural teachers ( $M=1.88$ ,  $SD=.800$ ) does not differ from that undertaken by urban teachers ( $M=2.02$ ,  $SD=.753$ ).

It can be affirmed that there were no statistically significant differences observed in any of the dimensions between the teaching staff in the two distinct environments. Thus, it can be deduced that there are no differences in work performance between the two groups, irrespective of where the teachers' activities are conducted.

The limitation that exists in this analysis consists in the fact that the number of respondents who teach in these environments is not equal, so the two groups are not similar from the point of view of volume, but nevertheless there is homogeneity in the results obtained.

*Table 3. The results of the Independent T-test  
for the environment variables and dimensions of work performance*

	rural and urban environment	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T Test
TASK_PERFORMANCE	rural	41	4.40	.528	$t(170)=.684$ , $p=.495$
	urban	131	4.34	.544	
PROACTIVE_BEHAV	rural	41	4.21	.712	$t(170)=.626$ $p=.532$
	urban	131	4.14	.700	
SELF_DEVELOPMENT	rural	41	4.51	.541	$t(170)=.897$ $p=.834$
	urban	131	4.42	.505	
COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR	rural	41	1.88	.800	$t(170)=-1.035$ $p=.542$
	urban	131	2.02	.753	

The hypothesis according to which there is a statistically significant relationship between the age of the respondents and the dimension of the work performance concept is tested with the help of a correlation analysis (**Table 4**), so we can identify if age is a predictor of performance at work in the didactic activity of teachers.

Results showed there was a weak, negative correlation between age of respondents, and counterproductive work behavior,  $r (-182) = .017$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . This can be interpreted by the fact that the older the teacher, the more easily he adapts to the functionality of the system, so that he quickly overcomes dysfunctions, assumes, and accepts the system as it is.

Another weak, negative correlation can be mentioned, this time between two dimensions of the work performance, task performance and counterproductive work behavior  $r (-223) = .003$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

**Table 4.** The results of the bivariate correlation analysis for the variable dimensions of work performance and age

		TP	PB	SD	CWB	Age:
TASK_PERFORMANCE (TP)	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>	1	.423**	.545**	-.223**	.130
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>		.000	.000	.003	.088
PROACTIVE_BEHAV	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>		1	.656**	-.070	.027
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>			.000	.364	.724
SELF_DEVELOP	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>			1	-.215**	.112
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>				.005	.143
COUNTER_PROD	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>				1	-.182*
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>					.017
AGE	<b>Pearson Correlation</b>					1
	<b>Sig. (2-tailed)</b>					

\*\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The hypothesis that affirms that the status of the teacher contributes in a significant way to changes in work performance was examined using the independent samples T-Test.

For the task performance dimension  $t (170) = .037$ , for  $p=.600 > 0.05$ , the work performance of those who are substitute teachers ( $M=4.350$ ,  $SD=.540$ ) is approximately equal to that of those who are full teachers ( $M=4.354$ ,  $SD=.541$ ). So, it follows that the hypothesis is denied and the status does not represent a criterium for distinguishing.

For the proactive behavior dimension  $t (170) = -1.976$ , for  $p=.086 > 0.05$ , the proactive behavior of substitute teachers ( $M=3.93$ ,  $SD=.800$ ), is similar to the ones who are full teachers ( $M=4.20$ ,  $SD=.669$ ).

For the self-development dimension  $t (41.525) = -.1337$ , for  $p=.000 < 0.05$ , the behavior and actions oriented towards the own development of rural substitute teachers ( $M=4.31$ ,  $SD=.622$ ) slightly differ from the behavior of urban teachers ( $M=4.47$ ,  $SD=.481$ ). Even though  $p$  is under 0.05, there is not enough evidence of different significance between substitutes and full professors from the self-development dimension.

For the counterproductive work behavior dimension  $t(170) = -344$ , for  $p=.883$ , the counterproductive work behavior of substitute teachers ( $M=1.95$ ,  $SD=.749$ ) does not differ from full teachers ( $M=2.00$ ,  $SD=.770$ ).

An inherent limitation in this analysis arises from the unequal distribution of respondents between the two statuses (full and substitute). Consequently, the groups differ in terms of volume, yet their outcomes are comparable. Based on the data, it is deduced that full-time teachers do not exhibit greater involvement and performance in teaching compared to substitute teachers. This phenomenon can be attributed to the prevalence of young and enthusiastic substitute teachers who are eager to engage and learn.

**Table 5.** The results of the Independent T-test for the status of the teachers (full and substitute professors) and dimensions of work performance

	Status of the professors:	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Independent T Test
TASK_PERFORMANCE	substitute	33	4.3506	.54056	$t(170)=.037$ , $p=.600$
	full	139	4.3546	.54149	
PROACTIVE_BEHAVIOR	substitute	33	3.9394	.80076	$t(170)=-1.976$ , $p=.086$
	full	139	4.2058	.66939	
SELF_DEVELOP	substitute	33	4.3182	.62272	$t(41.525)=-1.337$ , $p=.000$
	full	139	4.4730	.48125	
COUNTERPRODUCTIV WORK BEHAVIOR	substitute	33	1.9508	.74931	$t(170)=-.344$ , $p=.883$
	full	139	2.0018	.77084	

In deepening the differences between the groups in terms of the dimensions of the concept of work performance, they were divided according to the professional degree of the teachers.

To test if there are significant differences between the teaching degree held by the teachers and the dimensions of the concept of work performance, a One-Way ANOVA Test was carried out,  $F=8.294$  for  $p=0.00 < 0.05$  (**Table 6**), which confirms that there are statistically significant differences between teachers with different degrees in terms of the dimension called task performance. So that the 4 groups are: without a teaching degree ( $M=4.49$ ,  $SD=.492$ ), with the first stage of the teaching career ( $M=4.16$ ,  $SD=.582$ ), with a teaching degree 2 ( $M=3.99$ ,  $SD=.669$ ) and with a teaching degree 1 ( $M=4.48$ ,  $SD=.434$ ).

In all other cases, the significance threshold exceeds the imposed value, which means that in the other three dimensions, there are no statistically significant differences between people with different didactic degrees in terms of proactive behavior, self-development, and counterproductive work behavior.

**Table 6.** The results of the One-Way ANOVA test for the didactic degree variables and the dimensions of the concept of work performance

ANOVA						
		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
TASK_PERFORMANCE	Between Groups	6.426	3	2.142	8.294	.000
	Within Groups	43.388	168	.258		
	Total	49.814	171			
PROACTIVE_BEHAVIOR	Between Groups	3.671	3	1.224	2.551	.057
	Within Groups	80.575	168	.480		
	Total	84.246	171			
SELF_DEVELOPMENT	Between Groups	1.321	3	.440	1.693	.170
	Within Groups	43.689	168	.260		
	Total	45.010	171			
COUNTERPRODUCTIVE WORK BEHAVIOR	Between Groups	.249	3	.083	.140	.936
	Within Groups	99.787	168	.594		
	Total	100.036	171			

**Table 7.** The results of the Games Howell post hoc test for didactic degree and task performance variables

Multiple Comparisons						
Gradul didactic:	Gradul didactic:	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
fara grad didactic	definitivat	.33036	.16042	.186	-.1023	.7630
	gradul didactic II	.49679*	.18181	.045	.0084	.9851
	gradul didactic I	.00622	.13052	1.000	-.3608	.3733
definitivat	fara grad didactic	-.33036	.16042	.186	-.7630	.1023
	gradul didactic II	.16643	.16891	.758	-.2831	.6160
	gradul didactic I	-.32413*	.11185	.029	-.6231	-.0251
gradul didactic II	fara grad didactic	-.49679*	.18181	.045	-.9851	-.0084
	definitivat	-.16643	.16891	.758	-.6160	.2831
	gradul didactic I	-.49056*	.14081	.008	-.8740	-.1071
gradul didactic I	fara grad didactic	-.00622	.13052	1.000	-.3733	.3608
	definitivat	.32413*	.11185	.029	.0251	.6231
	gradul didactic II	.49056*	.14081	.008	.1071	.8740

\*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The results of the Games-Howell Post Hoc test (**Table 7**) further allowed the identification of groups between which there are statistically significant differences, so that differences can be noted between teachers who hold the first degree ( $M=4.48$ ) and those who hold the didactic degree 2 ( $M=3.99$ ), for  $p=0.008<0.05$ , so that the people who hold the first degree are more oriented towards the fulfillment of the tasks and implicitly are more efficient.

The same can be observed between the groups of people without a teaching degree ( $M=4.49$ ) and those with a 2nd degree ( $M=3.99$ ), for  $p=0.045<0.05$ , but also between those with definite (are on their first step in the didactic career) ( $M= 4.16$ ) and those with first grade (4.48) for  $p=0.029<0.05$ .

## Conclusions

In conclusion, work performance is a complex and also important concept that remains open for further development. While previous studies have linked it to various other concepts, the discussions on this topic are not yet exhaustive.

Through this study, teachers' work performance during the pandemic in public schools, using a quantitative approach with the IWPQ scale (Koopmans et al., 2014), was examined. The study offers insights into the pandemic's impact on teachers' performance in the Western region.

This study has certain limitations, as discussed throughout the results section. However, these limitations did not impact the study's findings. One of the limitations pertains to the unequal number of teachers in different categories. Specifically, the number of respondents who teach in different environments (rural, urban) is not equal, leading to dissimilarity in group sizes. Nevertheless, despite this discrepancy in volume, there is consistency in the obtained results. An inherent limitation in this analysis stems from the uneven distribution of respondents between the two statuses (full and substitute professor). Consequently, there is a disparity in group sizes, yet their outcomes are comparable. More than that, it wasn't possible to compare the group using the gender criteria, because of the reduced number of responses from the male. But this fact can be understandable because the national education system is dominated by females.

Following an exploratory factor analysis, the contextual performance (CP) dimension was divided into two factors: proactive behavior and self-development. This division was made to better capture patterns observed in the data.

The study results suggest that full-time teachers do not show higher involvement or performance in teaching compared to substitute teachers. This could be attributed to the prevalence of enthusiastic and engaged substitute teachers, who are often younger and eager to involve and to learn.

T-tests revealed no statistically significant differences across dimensions between teaching staff in distinct environments. Consequently, it can be concluded that work performance does not significantly differ between the two groups, regardless of their teaching setting.

The hypothesis testing the correlation between respondents' age and dimensions of work performance was analyzed using a correlation analysis. The results indicated a weak, negative correlation between age and counterproductive work behavior. This could be explained by older teachers' adaptability to system functionality and their ability to overcome dysfunctions.

However, it's important to acknowledge that the results provide a snapshot and are not fully generalizable to the entire teacher population in Timis County.

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# NO ONE LEFT BEHIND: THE CHANGING OF URBAN PUBLIC SPACE INTO THE LEARNING CENTER FOR THE LOWER-MIDDLE CLASS COMMUNITY IN INDONESIA

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**ABSTRACT:** The COVID-19 virus had caused certain disruptions for the life of human beings, including the aspect of education for children as future generations. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, children from the lower-middle class community in urban areas had very limited access to the online learning from school as suggested by the Indonesian national government. It was mainly due to their deficient economic background. Even though, from another perspective, it can be considered that there was a potential social safety net that supported our children in poor urban areas to be engaged in the process of teaching and learning during the pandemic. Thus, no one will be left behind. A social response had been made to tackle this issue. Informal education and online learning accompaniment were given by the local community, especially the managers of the urban public space. This urban public space had transformed into a learning center. Nevertheless, there are some potential lessons learned for the future. For instance, there should be more creative ways of delivering education during the uncertainty and more collaborations with other related parties, for instance local urban youth or Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs). To understand the issue, this research drew on a case study of Tanah Tinggi, Jakarta, Indonesia, especially taking an issue of Child-friendly Integrated Public Space (in Indonesian, it is called Ruang Publik Terpadu Ramah Anak or RPTRA) as a specially designed urban public space in Jakarta. This research employed a qualitative approach by conducting in-depth interviews and visual participatory methods with fifteen urban dwellers and managers of RPTRA Rusun Tanah Tinggi during the period of COVID-19 pandemic.

## Introduction

In 2016, the provincial government (*pemerintah provinsi*) of Jakarta under the former governor Basuki Tjahaja Purnama launched a specially designed public space for children. It is called Child-friendly Integrated Public Space, or more commonly known as Ruang Publik Terpadu Ramah Anak (RPTRA). This urban project was considered as a “breakthrough” amid the threat of massive shrinking public spaces and greeneries in Jakarta, particularly during the last decade (Egaratri, 2017). Children can come to these public spaces, usually accompanied by their parents or relatives, and do several activities, such as doing sports, chit-chatting with friends, enjoying scenery, and reading books or studying together (Permanasari et al., 2020; Sugiyono & Dwianto, 2021). The official data of the provincial government of Jakarta announces that up to 2018, there were 296 RPTRAs in each sub-district all around Jakarta<sup>1</sup>.

Other than its main purpose, which targets children as their main users, another interesting initial idea coming from this urban project is that the management of the RPTRA should involve the role of the surrounding local communities. It means that there should be an intense connection between the RPTRA as an urban public space and the real needs of the local communities (Hidayat & Utari, 2018). On the one hand, the active role of the local communities in the process of the RPTRA’s management is indeed important and cannot be ignored as such. And, on the other hand, various programs provided by the managers of the RPTRA should answer the actual demands of the local communities.

The shocking COVID-19 pandemic then suddenly came and hit the global society. In Indonesia, the first case was announced on March 2, 2020, by President Joko Widodo<sup>2</sup>. As a response, all urban public spaces in Jakarta, including RPTRA, were closed by the provincial government of Jakarta as an anticipation to the massive spreading of the COVID-19 virus (Rustanto & Akhmad, 2020a). This decision perhaps can be considered as an easy matter for urban dwellers who live in gated communities. They probably have their own certain mini park, surrounded by high fences to guarantee comfortability as well as safety, where their children can do their activities during the pandemic. On the

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.jakarta.go.id/rptra>, accessed on August 12, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> See Kompas.id, April 18, 2020, “Rangkaian Peristiwa Pertama Covid-19,” <https://www.kompas.id/baca/riset/2020/04/18/rangkaian-peristiwa-pertama-covid-19>, accessed on June 30, 2023.

contrary, those who live in poor areas have very limited living spaces. Therefore, the existence of urban public spaces is crucial for them, especially children (Sugiyono, 2021; Sugiyono, 2022). After certain assessments from the provincial government, the strict health protocols (*protocol kesehatan*) were then enforced during the period of the pandemic. Some urban public spaces were afterwards re-opened.

Taking this background into consideration, this article aims to highlight the special issue of education for children from lower-middle class families during the COVID-19 pandemic in a metropolitan city in Indonesia. It particularly tackles the phenomenon of urban public space's transformation into the learning center for the lower-middle class communities. Such transformation can be assumed as a right answer for children from local communities' problems in following the online lessons from their schools as suggested by the national government amid certain shortages. Some benefits and struggles were experienced both by the managers of RPTRA and the local communities. Moreover, some lessons learned can be taken from this kind of experience for the better service provided in the urban public spaces in Indonesia.



**Picture 1.** Tanah Tinggi flats and its public space

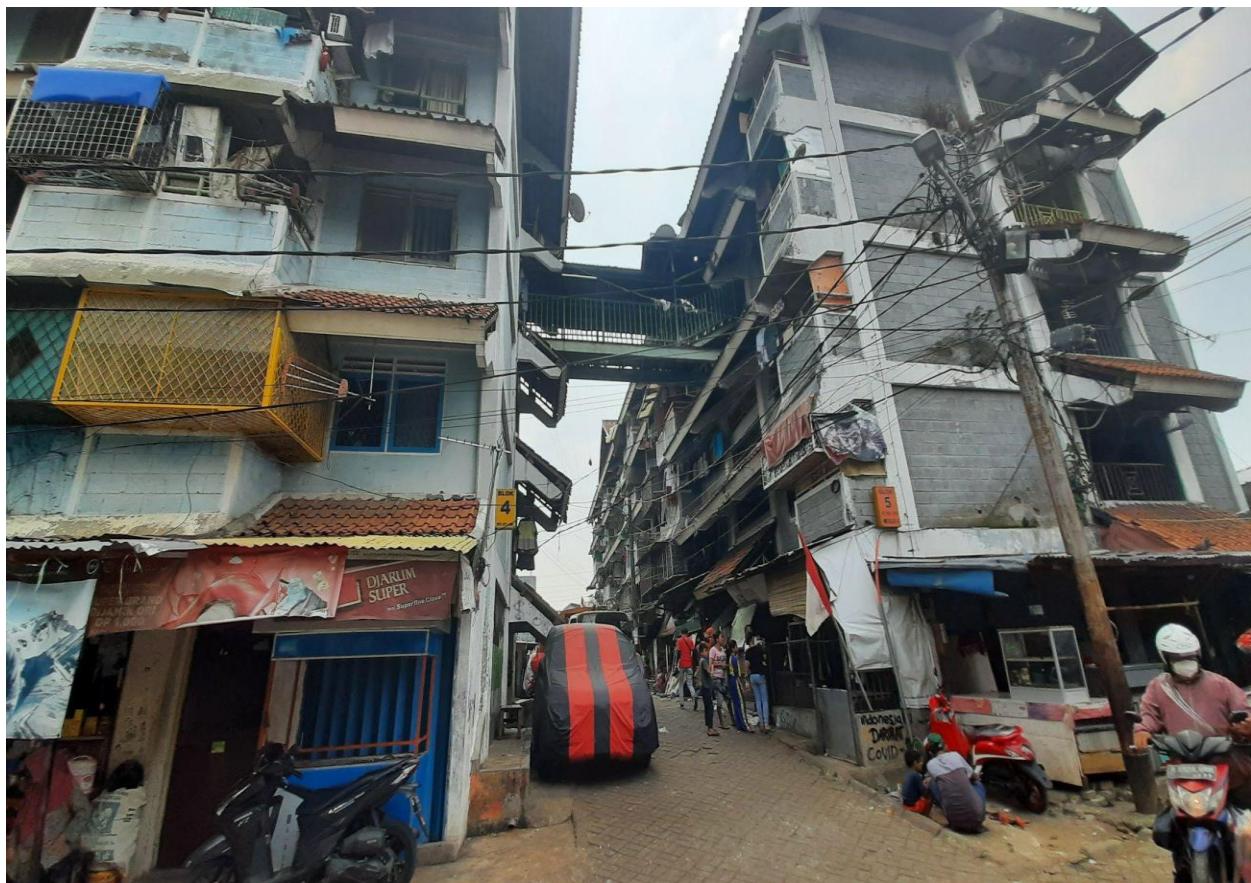
(By the author, August 26, 2021)

## Methodology

This article is based on research which employed a qualitative approach. The online semi-structured in-depth interviews (Bryman, 2012) and visual participatory methods, including photo elicitation and auto-photography (Glaw et al., 2017) were conducted during the research. In the former method, a set of questions has been prepared to gain information from the informants through online medium, such as Zoom and Google Meeting. The questions are mainly related to the life of the local community during the pandemic in general, as well as particularly the utilization of the urban public space for educational purposes. However, other questions can be added to explore more information according to the informants' further responses. Meanwhile, the latter method invites more active and collaborative participation from the informants by using creative forms of expression, such as photography and drawing. By using these creative forms, the informants then can share their experience, feeling, thought, and opinion in more flexible ways.

In total, there were all fifteen informants participating in the research, including the local urban dwellers (chiefs of local community, religious leaders, youths, and other local dwellers) and the managers of RPTRA as an urban public space (sub-district officers and daily managers). They were all considered as key informants of this research. In addition, this research was conducted during the period of COVID-19 pandemic, from July 2021 to February 2022, thus direct contacts and communications with the informants were minimalized to prevent the spreading of COVID-19 virus. This was also in line with the instruction from the provincial government of Jakarta, regarding social mobility during the pandemic.

Moreover, the research drew on a case study of urban public space in the lower-middle class community in the area of Tanah Tinggi, Central Jakarta, Indonesia. This location was chosen since the local community in this area seems to really need urban public space due to the very limited living areas which they have. In fact, they live in flats (*rumah susun*) which have narrow rooms in each flat. Thus, urban public space is assumed to be multi-functional for them, including in offering the help to provide certain educational programs for children during the COVID-19 pandemic. Help can alleviate the burdens felt either by parents or children.

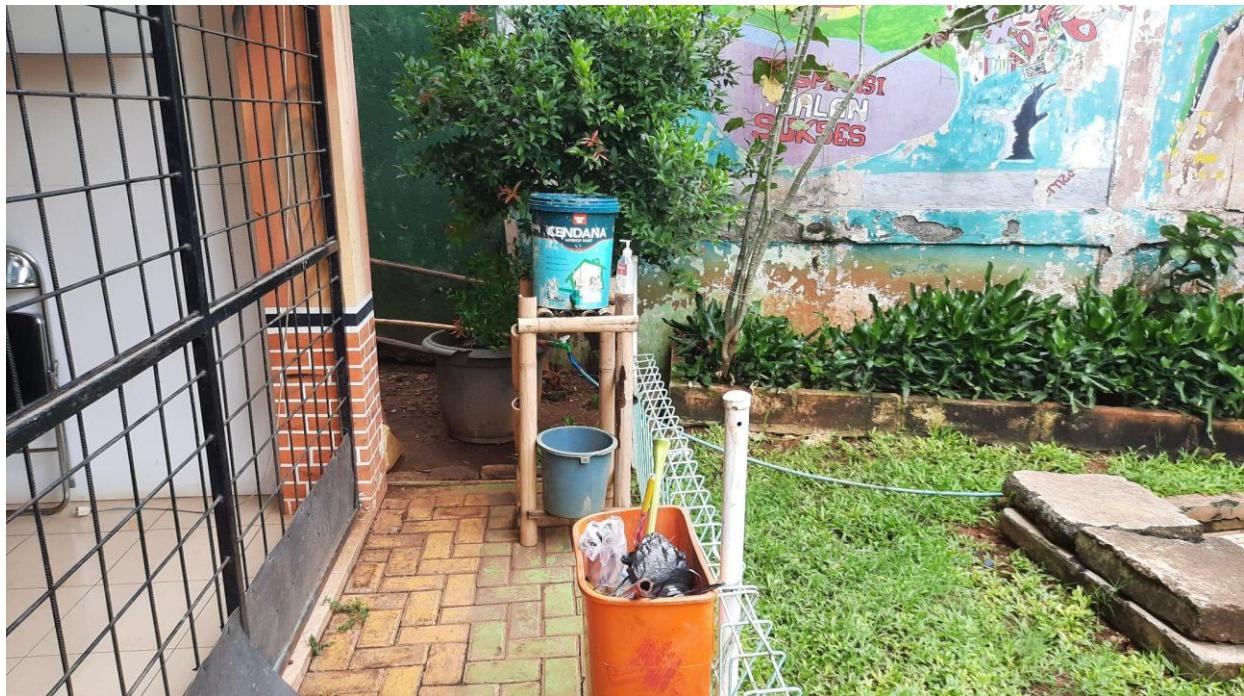


*Picture 2. Two flats are connected by a small bridge in the middle*

*(By the author, August 26, 2021)*

## **The Changing of Urban Public Space into the Learning Center**

The COVID-19 virus, as we all know, had caused certain disruptions for the life of human beings, including the aspect of education for children. In the context of Indonesia, some changes and adaptations had been made by the national government in terms of education, for instance delivering the lessons in school online and giving materials that can be read and done by the students at home. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, children from the lower-middle class community in urban areas had very limited access to this online learning from school, as suggested by the national government. It was mainly due to their deficient economic background. For example, they do not have their own handphone or laptop to join online classes, proper internet network connection, as well as supporting social ambience at home. In reality, instead of trying to join online classes, they prefer playing outside with their friends.



*Picture 3. The provision of water and soap in front of the main building of the urban public space in Tanah Tinggi flats (By the author, January 1, 2022)*

To tackle the above-mentioned issue, such social response had consequently been made by the local community, especially those who work officially in the urban public space. Online learning accompaniment and informal education were given by the managers of the urban public space, particularly RPTRA (Dewi, 2022; Rustanto & Akhmad, 2020b). These were surely accompanied by the practice of strict health protocols, such as avoiding handshake, maintaining a physical distance, sterilizing hands with sanitizer, and providing water and soap for handwashing. Taking this social response into account, the author argues that this “special answer” then can be assumed as a transformation of an urban public space into a learning center for children from the lower-class family.

What kind of online learning accompaniment and informal education were then delivered by the managers of the urban public space during the pandemic? In fact, there were various kinds of them, spanning from the formal ones to the informal ones. Initially, to help the children engaged with online learning from school, the managers of the RPTRA offered the help to be a partner to follow such an online learning because they provided an excellent internet network connection (wi-fi) in the RPTRA. By providing internet network connection, the children then can easily join the online learning. The managers of the RPTRA can also help the children if there were any technical problems during the online learning. More than that, the managers of the RPTRA also offered to

help to teach the children some school subjects, for instance Mathematics and Languages. Even, the children can also ask questions if they face any difficulty in doing the task or homework from school that must be done by themselves. And the parents or children did not need to pay a certain amount of money, because the managers gave the services for free.

"In the afternoon, around 1 or 2 p.m., we have mathematics class for elementary school and junior high school students. The managers take the whole responsibility for providing this kind of class for the children". (Ms. Eni, pseudonym, the manager of RPTRA Rustanti, January 5, 2022).

Other than those services related to formal education, the managers of the RPTRA also provided certain services related to informal education. For example, they helped and encouraged children to sing some songs or draw pictures. These services were given particularly to those who have not yet joined a formal education or, in this case, at least an elementary school. Even the managers of the RPTRA also accompanied the children in learning religion and doing religious activities (*mengaji*). This religious education is considered important as well, since it becomes one subject that should be learned by the children according to the expectation of their parents (Pratiwi et al., 2022). Indeed, the author sees that the provision of these various educational activities is very beneficial for the children from the lower-middle class community during the pandemic.

As a matter of fact, if we want to trace back to the situation before the pandemic, these various kinds of educational programs had already been delivered by the managers of the RPTRA to the local children. These were ones of various programs provided by the managers for the local communities. Yet, unfortunately, the managers did not do it routinely. Sometimes, some children come to the RPTRA initiatively asking for such program, but they do not always get a positive response from the managers. The educational programs, in fact, are pretty much related to the skills of each manager in the RPTRA. If, because of certain reasons they must move to another RPTRA within the same sub-district, then the educational programs will also be gone<sup>3</sup>. There is clearly an issue of sustainability here. And, during the pandemic, this kind of program became popular

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<sup>3</sup> For the managers of the RPTRA, there is a rule that they must move to another RPTRA within the same sub-district gradually, for instance once in three or four months. The schedule will be made by the sub-district officer who has responsibility regarding public spaces. From the interview, it can be understood that the reason behind this rule is to "refresh" the managers with new situation in the same sub-district, as well as make them more familiar with the broader situation within the sub-district.

again, since the managers saw that there was an increasing problem, both from parents and children, to join the online learning from the schools.

"Before the pandemic, we honestly already did various educational activities in our public spaces. We taught the children, for instance how to read, write, count, and many more". (Ms. Dina, pseudonym, the manager of RPTRA Rustanti, February 17, 2022).

## **The Benefits and the Struggles**

Considering the transformation, there are some benefits and struggles experienced by the related parties, either the managers of the urban public space or the local community. From the perspective of the positive side, there are at least three benefits that can be taken from such a transformation. First, the help of the managers of the urban public space to accompany the children surely eased the burden of the parents in accompanying their children to study during the pandemic. For the parents, the experience during the pandemic made them easily exhausted. Other than regular daily jobs and tasks, such as working, cleaning up the rooms in the flat, washing clothes, and cooking for the family, they also needed to accompany their children to study during the pandemic that they did not used to do previously. The situation was getting worse because their children were easily getting bored during the online learning. It was not easy to make them focus during the online learning. Moreover, the spaces within their rooms in the flat are also very limited. This was such a combination of insupportable ambience for children from lower-middle class community to join the online learning.

"The learning programs provided by the managers are very useful for the children. During the pandemic, the government is applying online learning for the children. They are studying through various online methods. It means that they must study from home. At home, they must be guided by their parents. Not every parent is able to accompany their children. Thus, I consider that the programs are very beneficial. During the pandemic, I see that my children are stressed. I, myself, am also stressed. Studying at home is considered as a social burden for us". (Ms. Dania, the local people, August 6, 2021)

Second, children can get direct accompaniment from the managers during the online learning or other informal lessons. As we know, during the online learning, there was no direct or face to face meeting between the teachers and the students. In some cases, the teachers never really knew the face of their students. Thus, direct accompaniment was considered useful in encouraging the willingness to study within the heart of children (Rustanto & Akhmad, 2020b). It was more than helping the children if they get any technical issue but being partner as well as "real" friend for the children during the online

learning. Third, besides the direct accompaniment, the process of learning together with their friends can also increase the willingness to study. It can be understood since children tend to avoid learning alone in front of their laptop or handphone for several hours. They got easily bored when they studied alone during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, from the perspective of the negative side, there are four struggles experienced by either the local community or the managers of the urban public space. First, in terms of the medium of online learning, there were only limited gadgets, such as laptops or handphones, that can be used by children. Not all children have their own gadgets. It means that the children should share their gadgets with their friends. Second, it can be argued that there are very limited spaces for numerous children in urban public spaces. As can also be seen in Picture 4, the library is so small. If there were more than five children joining at the same time, it might be very difficult for the managers, especially regarding the strict health protocols in maintaining physical distance among children.

Third, there was a certain apathetic way of thinking on the importance of strict health protocols of either the parents or the children. In most cases, on the one hand, the members of the local community really needed the help of the managers in delivering the lesson accompaniment. Yet, on the other hand, it could be criticized also that their awareness to practice strict health protocols was miserable. For instance, they seldom use face masks in their daily life during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It is not easy to deal with the situation in this area (Tanah Tinggi) during this pandemic. We must acknowledge that it is difficult to maintain the practice of health protocols. Many people do not want to obey these protocols”. (Ms. Arti, the sub-district officer, August 26, 2021)

“During this pandemic, we have already prepared hand sanitizers for the children. We have also reminded them to wear face masks. But you probably have come here and seen for yourself that many children did not wear face masks. Though, we have already given them face masks for free for many times”. (Mr. Cecep, the manager of RPTRA Rustanti, July 30, 2021)

Fourth, from the managers' point of view, there was a lack of economic incentives for them since this “transformation” could be considered as additional burdens aside from their regular tasks in taking care of the urban public space. Most of the managers hope that the provincial government of Jakarta could give them these economic incentives as they also gave to those who work in the health sector during the pandemic.



*Picture 4. The library that was used as a place to accompany children  
(By the author, January 5, 2022)*

## Lessons Learned

The experience of quick transformation has taught urban society to be more resilient in facing such uncertain and unpredictable situations. Regarding the issue of education during the pandemic, the lower-middle community attempts to help their children by transforming urban public places into learning center. From this experience, there are some lessons that can be learned for the future. First, the response by the managers of the urban public space to tackle the issue of online learning for the lower-middle class community should be highly appreciated in terms of numerous benefits and struggles that they face (Dewi, 2022). It reflects how they, as key actors, are brave to take certain initiatives as responses in the VUCA (volatile, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) situation (Taskan et al., 2022). Adaptation is an important key to how urban society can survive.

Particularly regarding education, the managers of the urban public space have shown that outside the primary social circle, either in school or family, local community does also play an important role in shaping and forming the children's education. Perhaps, they previously only contributed from the side of informal education. Yet, from the experience during the pandemic, they also prove that they can support from the side

of formal education. Therefore, the collaboration and hub between these parties are influential in making a good atmosphere of education for our children. However, it must be said that the role of the local community cannot replace the presence of the teachers at school.

Second, it is argued that there should be more creative ways in delivering education during the uncertainty, for instance in the COVID-19 pandemic, other than digital services. In general, digital services perhaps can be a good answer for the challenges in the issue of education. But, for certain communities, like those who come from the lower-middle class, it is not easy to comply with this kind of digital or online learning. Therefore, it is worth trying other ways in accompanying the children to learn, such as bringing them to the open natural areas to directly learn from nature (*sekolah alam*) (Syaikhu et al., 2022). Urban public spaces surely give the ambience and proximity to nature.

This perspective presumably can strengthen the position of the children as active students. Having experience by themselves in the process of learning will improve the way they acquire knowledge and gain understanding as main actors. It will shift the center of learning from teachers to students. In other words, it negates the paradigm which sees that teachers are the only center of education, which consequently results in the one directive learning process, positioning students as passive actors. Meanwhile, students will get freedom to explore the richness of knowledge as well as their own unique process to gain that knowledge. However, the role of the teachers is still important. They act rather as facilitators who encourage students to improve and use all skills that they have, than as advisors in terms of directing students where to go.

Third, particularly related to the provision of the educational programs in the urban public spaces, the author suggests that there should be more collaboration with other related parties, for example local urban youth (*karang taruna*) or civil society organizations (CSOs) (Permanasari et al., 2019; Prakoso & Dewi, 2018). Thus, the burdens to accompany the children are not only in the hands of the managers of the urban public space but also in the hands of other volunteers. Young people, for example, have more energy and time, as well as creativity in accompanying their little brothers and sisters. Or the CSOs perhaps can do a favor in building such a social network to ease the burdens of the managers.

And fourth, the thing that is usually forgotten and taken for granted, the provincial government should give more attention to the economic incentives to the managers of the urban public spaces. Somehow, these economic incentives can encourage them so that they are more willing to give special services during the uncertainties. Or the provincial government can also give certain economic incentives to the urban public spaces'

management. Thus, the managers can improve various facilities in the urban public space that related to the education for children. For instance, they can provide more new books that can be read by the children, especially those who come from lower-middle class families who cannot afford to buy new literature, even though they want.

## Concluding Remarks

During the uncertainties, the “special strategies” indeed should be made to tackle the barriers of children’s education, especially for those who come from lower-middle class families. In this case, the changing or transformation of the urban public space into the “open” learning center to ease the burdens of parents and children is one of the examples. Therefore, there will be no one left behind in pursuing further education for a better future. Furthermore, in the practice, the initiatives and help from other parties should be highlighted, for instance from urban local youth as volunteers, CSOs, or provincial government. More collaborations are indeed needed. In the future, the author argues that this kind of “informal education accompaniment” can be considered as a good practice for life in the post-pandemic society.

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# When Research Method and Internet Become Important Factors to Gain Achievement in Alternative Education Institution

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**ABSTRACT:** The emergence of community-based alternative education is a positive sign indicating the strong awareness of the importance of education among civil society. Moreover, so far, the emergence of alternative education has developed more as a symptom of the commercialization of education among the upper middle class who feels uncomfortable and bored with various forms of uniformity that take place in formal educational institutions. The emergence of alternative education established by various civil society leaders for the lower classes of society has received a very positive response, moreover, the alternative education established in its development has achieved many achievements beyond alternative education that has grown in middle- and upper-class environments, or government-owned schools in general. There are at least two important elements that have given rise to the various achievements of two community-based alternative educational institutions, namely Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) in Yogyakarta and Qoryah Thaybah in Salatiga. First, the use of research-based learning methods, not a curriculum system. The two educational institutions do not apply the curriculum as found in formal schools, where the methods and processes are uniform. Second, the utilization of the internet as a learning resource, in addition to other learning resources, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic era. The combination of research methods and the utilization of learning resources from the internet has so far been recognized as an important factor that has driven various achievements in the two alternative educational institutions as mentioned above, so this study aims to find out and analyze how the two alternative educational institutions implement both in the process. How assistants, in this context both school instructors and parents, involve in achieving student achievement? What is the benchmark for success in learning at these two alternative educational institutions? By utilizing the theory of pedagogy of the oppressed and problem-oriented education from Paulo Freire and productive pedagogy from Bob Lingard, this study attempts to answer various questions posed in the problem formulation. In addition, this research will utilize descriptive methods to carry out the process of collecting data, where specifically the researcher will observe the two alternative educational institutions, and then interview a number of informants, such as study companions, both representing the two educational institutions and a number of parents of students who are determined

individually. Purposively, apart from that to complete the data, the researcher also conducted interviews with a number of students who were studying at SALAM and Qoryah Thaybah alternative educational institutions, especially those who were equivalent to grade 3 of senior high school. In addition, researchers will also utilize various secondary data from research results that have been carried out by various previous researchers.

The emergence of community-based alternative education is a positive sign indicating the strong awareness of the importance of education in society. Moreover, so far, the alternative education has developed more as a symptom of the commercialization of education among the upper middle classes, who feel uncomfortable and bored with various forms of uniformity that take place in schools (formal educational institutions). The emergence of alternative education established by communities for the lower classes has received positive response, good achievements, and recognition.

There are at least two important elements that have given rise to the various achievements of two community-based alternative educational institutions we studied, namely *Sanggar Anak Alam* [Natural Students Studio] in Yogyakarta and *Qoryah Thaybah* [Prosperity Village] in Salatiga. First, the use of research-based learning methods. The two educational institutions do not apply the curriculum as found in formal schools, where the methods and processes are uniform. Second, the utilization of the internet as a learning resource beside library, community experience, companion, especially during and after the Covid-19 pandemic era.

The combination of research methods and the utilization of learning resources from the internet has so far been recognized as an important factor that has driven various achievements in the two alternative educational institutions as mentioned before. This research aims to find out and analyze how teachers (companions), parents in two alternative educational institutions implement curriculum and methods in the educational process. What is the benchmark for success in learning at these two alternative educational institutions?

By utilizing the theory of pedagogy of the oppressed from Paulo Freire, this study mainly attempts to answer various questions posed in the problem formulation. In addition, this research will utilize primary data, specifically digging from interview, and secondary data as journals, books, online resources (official school website, news, etc.), also research results that have been produced by various previous researchers. All data will be explained and analyzed by theories explained above, mainly from Freire point of view.

## Introduction

The emergence of community-based alternative education in several places in Indonesia in recent years is an encouraging social phenomenon; this phenomenon can be interpreted by the growing awareness and widespread support for the importance of education for the community, especially for those who are classified as poor, generally living in the suburbs or urban limits, and working as laborers and farmers. So far, alternative educational institutions are only known in urban areas, and are also consumed by the upper middle class; besides that, the organizers are private parties or the education industry. The existence of alternative educational institutions has recently become increasingly popular in the eyes of parents, along with the increasing awareness of the importance of developing various capacities of children, both academic and non-academic, in a more relaxed learning environment, and away from various forms of pressure, so that children can grow and develop optimally, in addition to keeping children away from external disturbances that often occur, such as bullying, fighting, as well as other forms of juvenile delinquency. Not to mention that in today's digital era various forms of interference with child development are no less terrible, such as cyber bullying, the rise of hoax information, pornography, online gambling, and all of that can interfere with children's mental and psychological development. The proliferation of alternative educational institutions, such as home schooling in urban areas, can certainly play a role in initiating children from various disorders as described above, although on the other hand criticism of these educational institutions also arises, for example anti-social excesses that can be raised on students' social lives. In addition to that, alternative educational institutions such as home schooling are generally difficult to access for all social strata of society, because the cost of education is not affordable for all groups.

The higher the level of education in an alternative educational institution, the more expensive is the cost of education that must be incurred by community members. However, this situation does not occur in community-based alternative educational institutions, because such institutions, from the beginning of their establishment, are usually intended to help accommodate the educational needs of members of the community who come from underprivileged groups, and to seek benefits from their members. This picture is at least attached to two educational institutions known as Sanggar Anak Alam (SALAM) in Yogyakarta, and Qoryah Thayybah in Salatiga. These two alternative education institutions have long organized and developed alternative education activities at various levels, ranging from primary to secondary education. This

research will reveal how these two community-based educational institutions can emerge and develop in the midst of their communities. How is the role of the curriculum and learning methods developed in the two community-based alternative education institutions implemented in the educational process, even though the socio-cultural conditions around them have many limitations.

This study chose the senior high school (SMA) level at two community-based alternative education institutions, SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah as the target of the study. These two alternative educational institutions were chosen because both have received various social recognitions from various circles, both government and non-government; besides that, these two institutions have inspired and encouraged the birth of similar educational institutions in various other regions. SALAM for example, has given birth to a Sekolah Akar Rumput (Grassroots School), in Sewon area, Bantul; Qoryah Thayybah has inspired the birth of Islamic Green School. In the digital era like today, various educational activities in the two alternative educational institutions above have become very easy to know and access unlimitedly.

## **Theoretical framework**

Many conceptions of education have been known in the wider community. There is opinion that: "education is supposed to transmit skill and bodies of knowledge which the individual will need to be successful in the world" (Berger & Berger, 1976, p. 192). This view is quite widely followed in society, although such views are not the only ones, especially since such views are set in the history and development of industrial western society. There is also another view that says that "education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge (Whitehead, 1967, p. 4). Despite various conceptions of what education is, it is difficult to deny that education is the site of contestation (Torres, 2003, p. 50).

Education has important and diverse functions and roles in society. Various perspectives of sociology, for example, try to describe it as follows: the perspective of functionalism says that education serves several functions for society. These include: (a) socialization, (b) social integration, (c) social placement, and (d) social and cultural innovation. Besides that, it has latent functions, such as childcare, the establishment of peer relationships, and lowering unemployment by keeping high school students out of the full-time labor force (Sociology, 2016).

The ideas explained before are most different from the educational function described by the followers of conflict theory, that ascertains that education promotes

social inequality through the use of tracking and standardized testing, and the impact of its "hidden curriculum". Schools differ widely in their funding and learning conditions, and this type of inequality leads to learning disparities that reinforce social inequality (Sociology, 2016).

The two views above certainly do not describe the entire perspective that exists in the study of education or sociology of education, because both are still related to system and structure problems, which forget the role of individuals or agents. In addition, there are views that emphasize the importance of the agent's position, how agents interpret their social world, build interaction with others; symbolic interactionism foregrounds the ways in which subjectivities not only help produce, but are themselves an important part of the social world (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p. 30). The view of symbolic interactionism affirms the importance of the agent before the structure. In other sections, there are theories that seek to transcend conditions of structure and agency, or optimism and pessimism, or tend to hover (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p. 50-51). Such is the idea that the task of education is to seek freedom, and we know that "freedom is acquired by conquest, not by gift. It must be pursued constantly and responsibly. Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion" (Freire, 2005, p. 47). Or in other words, the above idea indicates the importance of education that can overcome the dichotomy that takes place between oppressor and oppressed: "no longer oppressor nor longer oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom" (Freire, 2005, p. 49). In that context, oppressors are rulers who influence our lives through various policies and powers, and influence the social, political, economic, and cultural fields, and oppressed, namely those who are affected by various powers, policies, rules, and influences as described above.

The type of education as Freire has stated above is not entirely in the form of formal education, as formal schools have been widely known, but an educational model oriented towards humanization, liberation, and problem solving, or also known as problem posing. "In problem-posing education, people develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with and in which they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation" (Freire, 2005, p. 83).

This education model was developed in both alternative educational institutions, SALAM, in Yogyakarta, and Qoryah Thayybah in Salatiga. These two educational institutions are formed by communities that are aware of the influence and implications of systems that are considered oppressive and marginalize their lives, but they are aware of humanizing the system without them having to fall back into preserving or creating

education systems that marginalize and exclude humans. The cycle of violence in the form of a dichotomy between the oppressor and the oppressed is broken by forming human beings who have autonomy and are responsible for their individual and social lives.

To implement it in educational practice, both SALAM alternative educational institutions in Yogyakarta and Qoryah Thayybah in Salatiga give freedom to their students to learn what they really like (Gernatatiti, 2022), the involvement of parents and student companions, involving learning resources not only from libraries, community member experiences, the surrounding environment, and online resources, as well as the absence of the curriculum that applies in formal schools.

Based on the description above, both SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah community-based alternative education are in line with the pedagogical model formulated by Freire: "the pedagogy of the oppressed, as a humanist and libertarian pedagogy, has two distinct stages. In the first, the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy for all people in the process of permanent liberation. In both stages, it is always through action in depth that the culture of domination is culturally confronted" (Freire, 2005, p. 54).

Freire view's as cited in several part of this article seem with what scholars says, that: "Freire worked to transform teaching and learning from the limited concept of transmitting information to engaging in the project of completing one's identity and meaning in a meaning that needs to be made more equitable, humane, and just (Ornstein & Gutek, 2011, p. 122).

To find out more about the practice of education in the two institutions mentioned before, the following data and analysis are presented.

## **A Brief History of Salam and Qoryah Thayybah**

Both SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah have similarities and differences, in common both institutions were founded by social activists who have long been involved in the development and empowerment of the community. SALAM was founded by Toto Rahardjo and Wahya (Kusumaningrum & Melsasail, 2021). Both of them, long before establishing alternative educational institutions, had already established basic education institutions, such as early childhood education (PAUD), kindergartens and elementary schools. Since the beginning, they both referred to their educational institutions as learning centers or learning communities; they both seem to have never given the name

of the school to the educational institution they founded. The learning community was originally established to accommodate the learning needs of people who do not have the economic ability to access formal schools, both public and private.

Toto Rahardjo did not even complete his studies in college, majoring in architecture because he felt that universities, or higher education institutions (PT), were not efficient enough<sup>1</sup>, especially since he was already involved in various social activities with YB Mangunwijaya, a Catholic cleric with an architect background, graduated from one of the universities in Germany, but had concern for the bottom community, especially people living on the banks of the Code river, Yogyakarta. In addition, Toto Raharjo has also been active in community empowerment activities, especially in the Bothi Tribe, along with other activists who are members of an institution known as INSIST (Indonesian Society for Social Transformation); he has also been the director of ReaD (Research Education and Dialogue), YPRI (Indonesian People's Education Foundation), as well as the director of INVOLVEMENT (Indonesian Volunteers for Social Movement). Toto Rahardjo in recent years has also been active in a religious and cultural community called *Maiyah* [the value of togetherness of love and longing for Allah and the Messenger of Allah], even he is also recognized as one of the *marjak* [reference person] in religious and cultural communities that have networks in several major cities in Indonesia.

In addition to the name as explained on the top, another name that cannot be forgotten is Wahya Sri Wahyaningsih or more popularly called Wahya. According to her, SALAM school was established in 2000, with a research-based curriculum. But long before, Wahya had established a similar school in Lawen, Banjanegara, in 1988<sup>2</sup>. SALAM School developed organically; initially, SALAM opened a youth mentoring school every afternoon. Then, in 2004, PAUD (Early Childhood Education) was established. Not only stopping there, the impetus for the development of SALAM continued to emerge; until then, in 2008, an Elementary School (SD) was established, three years later there was also a need to establish a Junior High School (SMP), then in 2017 a Senior High School (SMA) was born (Rahardjo, 2018, p. 121-124). However, as Toto Rahardjo admitted, even though his involvement was quite intensive in the development process of SALAM, the intensity was still inferior to Wahya's totality in raising the community-based alternative education institution, because she never left SALAM as Toto Rahardjo, whose frequent involvement in various community empowerment activities took him away to organize communities in various remote regions in Indonesia, such as Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT), Papua, etc.

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<sup>1</sup> This explanation can be obtained at SALAM Yogyakarta, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n\\_hTW\\_C5Yb4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1n_hTW_C5Yb4), public lecture with Mr. Toto Rahardjo for SALAM parents, accessed 7, 1, 2023.

<sup>2</sup> Taken from CNN Indonesia, "Greetings for Learning Independence", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVyLw5OdQZ4&t=203s>, accessed 7, 2, 2023.

Even though there were many challenges when establishing SALAM, because this was something new, because the educational institution had no subjects, no uniforms, learning was carried out using research methods, there were students, mentors, and there was parental involvement, whose responsibilities were affirmed from the beginning when students chose to study there.

The same phenomenon also occurred at the Qoryah Thayybah institution, in Salatiga. This alternative education institution was also founded by an activist, who has a long track record in various community organizing activities, especially farmer groups. Bahrudin, as the founder of the alternative education institution in the Suharto era (New Order President), was often present in various discussion groups; one of which he had attended was a discussion that took place at the Rode Group, in Yogyakarta, which he conducted with anti-Suharto leadership activists. Although Bahrudin studied at the Tarbiyah [education] Department of State Islamic University (IAIN), Semarang, his credential, was never taken to this day (Bahrudin, 2007). Such an attitude shows that formal schooling is not a guarantee of life and death for him; besides that, Bahrudin in his village is respected, because after all he is the son of a village Kyai [traditional Islamic religion leader] where he lives. As a village Kyai, his parents' position is highly valued and respected in the community, because the Kyai in the village is a "patron" who is respected by the community; besides that, Kyai in Geertz's view also acts as a cultural broker (Geertz, 1960, pp. 228-249). As in SALAM alternative educational institutions, Qoryah Thayybah is also an alternative educational institution that frees the desire of its students to learn, without ever dictating students to learn something; they are free to learn what they want, besides that, research methods and participation are the basis for implementing the learning process contained in the educational institution.

There are four basic principles of Qoriyyah Thayibah alternative educational institutions. First, the spirit of liberation and improvement. This requires critical, dynamic, and creative behavior, not just dogmatic and static. Second, the principle of partiality. This means that this educational institution has a partiality to anyone who has the right to obtain education, especially the poor and indigent. Third, excitement as the basis of methodology in the learning process. In this context, the role of the teacher is only as a facilitator and the students are guided to be participatory. Fourth, the principle of collaborative togetherness and participation of all parties in designing the system, namely mentors (teachers), school administrators, students, parents, and the surrounding community<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> [https://www.kbqt.org/p/profile\\_15.html](https://www.kbqt.org/p/profile_15.html), accessed 7, 8, 2023.

## Curriculum

The two alternative educational institutions studied have a learning system that contains almost the same spirit, namely both want education to take place pleasantly, away from coercive elements. In SALAM educational institutions, since the beginning, it has been emphasized that the learning that is carried out always involves parents, schools (instructors), and children; the same is also done in Qoryah Thayybah, where once a month a meeting takes place between the school and parents. Likewise, in SALAM there are no parents who are hands-off in the child's learning process, on the grounds that parents have fulfilled financial obligations in the form of education costs to the school. This is reflected in all children's learning processes, including conducting research, for example regarding the choice of themes or objects to be determined as research or study material.

In conducting research, a student needs to do it according to the learning cycle known in SALAM, the process of which is divided into three stages. First - planning. At this stage there is a discussion between the child, parents, and facilitators regarding what they want to research. Second - mentoring. At this stage, parents and facilitators accompany children to conduct research, by doing several things: formulate research questions, make research schedules, make research observations, find, and collect references, collect research data through interviews with people who master the problem being studied. At this stage of research implementation, the role of parents and facilitators is very important, because in this section the facilitator helps children to develop research questions, so that the research is deeper and broader, and at this stage the facilitator includes learning indicators that must be achieved in the current semester. Third stage - parents and facilitators accompany children to present what they have researched to the school committee and other students. In each semester, students must complete the research they do, and the choice of the object of study in each semester will ideally narrow down to the big themes that students are interested in, although in reality in the early semesters students still do not have a focus, so changes of interest still often occur. At this point, the role of the facilitator direction becomes very important (Aji, facilitator at SALAM, interviewed on July 24, 2003). These facilitators at SALAM are divided into two groups - those who are recruited on a permanent basis, and those who are recruited as volunteers. These two types of facilitators have different rights and obligations. Facilitators who are recruited on a regular basis receive a fixed monthly salary, even though in reality the amount of money received is not like that for teaching profession in

formal schools. The results of the interviews showed that facilitators who were recruited regularly seemed to join SALAM more motivated because of elements of non-economic commitment, such as feelings of meaning as others, both wanted to learn, in short the motivation was more ideological. Moreover, Wahya as the initiator of SALAM, in the recruitment process for permanent facilitators, has discussed various conditions at SALAM, including financial capabilities, so that the recruited facilitators do not experience disappointment in the future (interview with Wahya, founder of SALAM, July 24, 2023). Non-permanent facilitators are generally recruited within the framework of being volunteers, who each semester, according to their contracts, can be changed and replaced.

SALAM also explained that since 2018 the educational institution has received assistance from the government, in the form of education operational cost (BOP) and school operational cost (BOS) funds. The amount of assistance obtained from the government is considered very helpful, although it has not been able to cover all financial needs incurred for operations. The existence of this assistance also cannot be separated from SALAM's position as a community learning center (PKBM), organization recognized by the government (Interview with Yudistira, Principal of SALAM, July 24, 2023). With this position, SALAM is recognized by the government, especially the Department of Education, both in region and province, so that at the same time SALAM can organize its own adjustment examination for those who need recognition from the state, as evidenced by the diploma issued by SALAM, recognized by the government.

However, this position does not mean the subordination of SALAM to the Government, or state intervention in the implementation of learning that has been going on at SALAM. In this position, borrowing Toto Rahardjo's term, the relationship that is built better describes mutualism symbiosis, because both benefit from each other. The country program is running, and the SALAM education community has various interests to continue education to a higher level; humanization, liberation, and independence can still be implemented (Rahardjo, 2018).

While in Qoryah Thayybah alternative education there is still a national curriculum, teachers who teach are required to master the material to be taught, but students start their lessons early; at 6.00 PM classes open in English, lessons take place like normal schools until 2.00 o'clock in the mid-day, but after that, if students want to stay to continue various activities at school, they are allowed; especially in educational institutions there is free internet access 24 hours, so students are free to use it all the time. Many students who return home from school go back to school to do activities they are interested in, playing guitar, surfing the internet, reading poetry, writing novels, and practicing theater. In short, educational institutions or schools support all positive

activities of students. So, it is not surprising that many students master various computer programs that they learn self-taught, fluent in English, good at playing music, producing various written works, books, novels, etc.

Since the beginning, SALAM only accepted 15 students for high school level in each batch; the limited capacity of students who can be accepted has as consequence a number of students to be refused to study at the educational institution. SALAM also never officially opens registration for new students, student recruitment is mostly done from people in the closest circle, or those who previously studied at a lower level. Of course, in the future this recruitment will be a problem because this educational institution is increasingly known and skyrocketed<sup>4</sup>. The limited number of students recruited in each batch year is intended so that the learning process and learning assistance by mentors can run effectively and optimally, in addition to the limited capacity of the institution. This decision also illustrates SALAM's consistency in its vision and mission as an alternative educational institution that is not established to seek as many students as possible, so that it can bring many benefits. This also does not mean that SALAM does not need a source of funding for its learning operations. Money is still needed, but so far financial resources for learning activities have been sourced from parents, although since 2018 SALAM managers have also received financial support from the government, including BOS (School Operating Costs) funds (interview with SALAM manager, July 24, 2023). In this context, SALAM can prove that quality education does not have to be expensive; the same is for the alternative education in Qoryah Thayybah. The financial resources in this institution come from parents of students, and assistance from the Salatiga local government, and of course BOS and BOP funds from the central government. In the context of funding assistance from the government, it seems that it cannot be separated from the central government's increasingly positive policy towards non-formal education, at least this is strengthened by the results of interviews conducted by researchers with a number of alternative education managers who are members of PKBM (Community Learning Activity Center) in several places, both in Yogyakarta and in Magelang (24, July -August 3, 2023). The government's policy that increasingly supports the non-formal schools as shaded by PKBM aims to fulfill the 12-year compulsory education program or equivalent to the Senior High School (SMA) level.

Interestingly, the two alternative educational institutions the researchers studied have never burdened parents in financial matters. Qoryah Thayybah collects money from students' parents or families; each day students have to bring Rp 3000.00, but the money will actually be returned to students, because it is allocated for breakfast costs, to buy

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<sup>4</sup> Results of observations and interviews with the management and facilitator team of SALAM, July 24, 2023.

guitars, and student computers. All the equipment was purchased from the students' savings collected every day. There are also donations from parents of students, the amount of which is adjusted according to the ability of each student's parents. Qoryah Thayybah explained that this institution also receives aid funds from local governments, whose money comes from the regional income and expenditure budget (APBD).

In short, students in these two educational institutions are self-educated, believe in their own abilities, and have concern for the environment. The relationship between students and the school, mentors, resource persons, is very egalitarian, seems far from formal and hierarchical relations. Therefore, the atmosphere in these two educational institutions is very conducive to the formation of students' self-awareness; moreover, awareness is an important key to the growth of emancipation (Fairclough, 2001, p. 193).

## **The Internet as a Learning Resource**

In SALAM educational institution the use of internet as a learning resource has long been known, but never emphasized as the most important source of learning, more than other sources of knowledge; the school still emphasizes learning resources from books and reading materials in the library, as well as from facilitators and mentors, and from the experiences of school community members, especially from parents. A high school student in one semester wants to learn automotive, then the facilitator together with the parents will guide the student to conduct research to study automotive problems, including suggesting the importance of various relevant reading materials, even encouraging to go and visit parents who are part of the learning community of SALAM. On the other hand, parents of students who do have expertise and mastery of knowledge and technical in the automotive field are happy to be involved in accompanying, guiding, and accepting their positions as resource persons. In this way, the learning process at SALAM can ultimately bring students to a pleasant learning atmosphere. Through research-based learning methods, it is impossible for a student to just know a lot and memorize various aspects related to the automotive field, unless later students must really understand, know, and master automotive problems well.

The use of internet as a learning resource at SALAM came to the fore when the COVID-19 pandemic arrived. Because at that time there was a ban on meeting and communicating directly, there was a need to keep a distance, not in direct contact, study from home, so the consequences of the SALAM educational institution were finally accommodating him. What is interesting about the learning experience during the Covid-19 period a few years ago, SALAM realized that the internet could encourage acceleration

in the learning process. A student's research usually can be completed in 6 months, but with the use of internet learning materials it turns out that the research process can be completed in just 3 months. Although they do not want an instant culture to grow in SALAM students, they think the internet can give rise to dualism. The research used in learning at SALAM is not the final product - take for example someone who wants to make *bakpia* [a kind of cake originally from Yogyakarta]; if you think of the *bakpia* product, it may take 2 hours to complete, but at SALAM we want the learning process to also be learned well. Why *bakpia*, what is its history? What are the raw materials? Where to get it? etc. So, the emphasis is more on the process, not just the result. Therefore, the internet on the one hand helps, on the other hand if it is not critical it can trap and give birth to a pseudo-culture. Not to mention that various aspects of skills can be lost, just with the click of a button, then everything is done (interview with Wahya, August 4, 2023, at SALAM, Yogyakarta). Based on this experience, SALAM educational institution finally considers the internet to be involved as one of the important learning materials, but it cannot replace the stages in the process. With this experience, learning resources become more varied, namely from books, other reading materials in the library, experiences of community members, facilitators and of course from the internet. In addition, in SALAM alternative education institutions, students are not required to have to come every day at school, to school is more intended for consultation with facilitators regarding the research process that has been decided (Kusumaningrum & Melsasail, 2021).

Facilitators at SALAM are not required to be those who have completed their studies at the first undergraduate level, but those who master the material to be taught to students, so it is not surprising that many of the learning facilitators are still studying at the undergraduate level. However, in SALAM there are two types of facilitators. First, the facilitator who remains. Second, facilitators who are recruited as volunteers. The first type is those who from the beginning are interested and want to become facilitators, so they receive a salary or income from the institution. For the second, usually SALAM opens recruitment for those who are interested in becoming volunteer in accordance with the term agreement of both parties (interview with Wahya, initiator, and manager of SALAM, at her residence, July 24, 2023). With well-managed arrangements, the replacement of facilitators or learning assistants does not interfere with student learning schedules and activities.

The conditions are somewhat different from what happened at the Qoryah Thayybah educational institution, because from the beginning this educational institution provided free internet access that could be used for 24 hours at school. It seems that this Qoryah Thayybah educational institution is lucky, because from the beginning it received free internet network support from an internet server entrepreneur in Salatiga, who also

has a strong concern for the world of education. With 24-hour internet access provided, it causes a feeling of excitement among students; even though it is an alternative educational institution, they are far from the city of Salatiga. The freedom of internet access turns out to be very positive, because students can learn whatever they want from the internet, practice exam questions, reading materials in any field of study, learn various foreign languages, various types of musical instruments, computer programs, singing, etc. The availability of unlimited internet access, if managed properly, of course, causes student learning interests to be well facilitated. Putting forward the interests of student learning reminds us of the following ideas: "Moving toward student-centric learning is not a new concept. ... What is new are the many ways digital technologies allow educators to personalize learning. Often change comes from a shift in culture, which is built on the nebulous foundation of traditions, values, beliefs, and rituals built up over time. School culture is all encompassing, yet elusive and often difficult to interpret. Nonetheless, the school culture determines the attitudes, beliefs, decisions and actions of educators and students" (ISTE, 2018).

The use of the internet as described will give rise to a new culture which of course is different from the learning culture that was previously widely known. This is different from what is discoursed in SALAM, which puts the internet as a factor that can give birth to instant culture. The concerns raised by Wahya are certainly very reasonable, especially since various studies have highlighted it a lot (take for example the study conducted by Grendi et al. (2022) on the use of Google machine among high school students in Yogyakarta, where the results of the study described the negative impact on students and school teachers, such as fooling, intellectual superficiality, and laziness in selecting information; students and teachers forget that behind the search engine there is an algorithm that determine and select answers.

In Qoryah Thayybah, the school also helps manage the monthly money students saved to buy computers, breakfast fees, and guitar instruments for each child. Therefore, cheap but quality school jargon is not an empty slogan, at least the slogan really manifests in Qoryah Thayybah; the various achievements of its students, both local and national, are quite a lot, especially in English lessons, arts, etc.

What is somewhat distinguishing in relation to curriculum issues are education, religion, and morals. In SALAM school religious education becomes a matter of each student's family or parents; religion is not discussed in educational institutions, and religion is also considered a private matter. This is of course somewhat different from other alternative schools, such as PKBM Khoiru Ummah in Bantul, Yogyakarta which emphasizes religious studies, especially *takhfidz* [*learning in many parts of holly book of Islam*]. Qur'an is a trademark or attraction to invite parents, in addition to students, in

alternative educational institutions studying various subjects that will be tested in the equation exam package C (equivalent to high school), such as Citizenship, Mathematics, Bahasa Indonesia, English, Economics, Sociology and Geography. This is as stated by the manager who is also the chairman of PKBM of Khoiru Ummah, namely Ganjar (interview on August 1, 2023). However, although formal religion is not discussed as a subject in educational institutions, the manifestation of religion arises through the formulation of various rules that accompany the learning process of students, for example, students must not fight each other, bully, must respect each other, etc. At first glance, the various rules made by consensus among the students more or less imply the existence of ethical and moral values, but indeed in SALAM there are no special religious lessons, although they have principles that are of course related to religion indirectly, such as "take care of yourself, take care of friends, and take care of the environment".

Meanwhile, in Qoryah Thayybah religious values are very strong, especially the social and cultural environment of the community around this educational institution guides religious values have been institutionalized in their daily lives. The surrounding community is also a follower of traditional Islam, namely Islam that has dialectic with the local culture of Javanese society. In the establishment of the Qoryah Thayybah, religion is not discussed and used as a subject in school, but Islamic values and practices, especially traditional Islam, have been institutionalized. Likewise, the students, generally come from the surrounding environment who practices the doctrine and traditional Islamic values. However, in its development, many parents from various regions in Indonesia have recently sent their sons and daughters to study at alternative educational institutions, so that the value of inclusivity began to be introduced and continued to grow and develop. One of the reasons why parents from various regions in Indonesia send their sons and daughters to the school is because this school educates students to be brave, humanizes students more than many other formal schools, so it is understandable if this school becomes the center of media coverage, and coverage of various private television programs.

## **Between submission and relative autonomy**

There are various reasons behind the birth of community-based alternative educational institutions, in this case SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah, some of which are as follows: the location of government-owned schools is generally located in the city, the cost of education is high, such as building donation money, uniform clothes, monthly education donations, transportation costs, recreation money, etc.; besides that, those who

used to help their parents work as farmers or ranchers are no longer able to do it, and those who choose schools in the city usually after graduation are reluctant to return to their villages because the potential for jobs is easily obtained in the city. So, the village is increasingly running out of school-age population. In short, there is an assumption that living in the city is more promising than in the village.

Therefore, the emergence of initiatives from the community to establish educational institutions in the village is an important breakthrough for the community, because with the presence of alternative educational institutions many community members will be absorbed into it, so that students do not have to migrate away from the village to access education, and eventually employment. Moreover, from the beginning of its establishment, these institutions were intended to facilitate community members who were unable so that they could read, write, count, have knowledge and skills in accordance with the wishes and levels of education they followed. In other words, many alternative educational institutions were established to facilitate students through mastery of provisions, knowledge and skills.

In other words, institutions initiated by the community want that with the knowledge and expertise of their students to be independent, even create jobs for themselves and the surrounding community; the village also remains productive because it does not depend on everything outside themselves, be it the state or other economic institutions. The resources in the village can also be managed and developed to achieve productivity and prosperity for the community, especially the surrounding residents. However, many alternative educational institutions that are members of PKMB choose the role of simply facilitating people who are not able, people who live in remote areas, in mountainous areas, to take the package C exam to have a diploma, so that with the diploma they can find a job, even continue their education to a higher level.

In the course of time, along with the increasing popularity and recognition from the community and the state, alternative educational institutions, especially SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah, are not only in demand by those who come from the lower class and cannot afford it, but also by those from the upper middle class. This happened in SALAM, especially some high school students who in fact currently come from upper-middle class families, some of them whose parents are lecturers, researchers at National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN), Presidential expert staff, etc. (interview with SALAM founder, Wahya, July 24, 2023).

In its development, there are always students in this alternative educational institution who want to continue their studies to a higher level. Students may feel that the skills and knowledge acquired so far are still not enough, or they may feel that their logic and analytical power have been honed and ready to be developed to a further level of

knowledge, or it could be because their awareness, which is formed during the interaction process inside and outside the institutional community alternative education, is getting stronger. To accommodate this development, inevitably institutions must cooperate with the government, especially the Ministry of Education, related to the scheme provided by the government, namely through the equalization exam route package C.

So far there are three types of education known in the community, namely formal, informal, and non-formal education. Community-based alternative education, as many communities do, is classified into non-formal types of education. One form of non-formal education that is relevant in the discussion in this paper is the Community Learning Activity Center (PKBM). There are actually several names or designations that are equivalent to non-formal education, that is, extramural education, or community education. Currently, non-formal education in the area around Yogyakarta is growing quite rapidly, namely as follows: in Sleman Regency alone the Education Office recorded as many as 22 PKBM, in Bantul Regency 25, and Gunung Kidul 31 PKBM. This does not cover several other remaining areas. According to the chairman of the Provincial PKBM, in Yogyakarta there are currently a total of 122 PKBM (interview with Chairman of PKBM Yogyakarta, August 2, 2023).

Lately, PKBM has been increasingly in demand by the public. Especially government support for non-formal education is also getting better, at least in 2018 various supports from the central government began to be realized in the form of School Operating Costs (BOS). The amount of BOS funding is highly dependent on the level of education. For students equivalent to package C or equivalent to high school, the amount for each child is Rp 1800,000 each year (interview with Principal SALAM, July 24, 2023). The amount of funding from the government is determined also from the number of students studying - the more students who study in the alternative education institution, the greater the amount of aid received. Another factor that also affects the amount of government assistance is the age of students, which does not exceed the age of 21 years (interview with Chairman of BKPM Yogyakarta, August 2, 2023). This age limit also continues to draw criticism, because it does not accommodate various reasons for students, such as geographical position, economic background, etc.

However, as mentioned earlier, in SALAM and also in Qoryah Thayybah, from the beginning the basis of the establishment was not for commercial purposes, or seeking profit as the education industry in general, so to cover the lack of operational costs incurred; parental participation is still needed, even though the size of the support is influenced by the ability of parents.

The use of funds from the government is used for various purposes, such as paying incentives for facilitators, or learning assistants. Some PKBM also hope that in the future

government assistance could be maximized, because with more assistance, PKBM could also recruit more student companions or tutors and increase their income level. Some PKBM also admit that they are not easy to get participation funds from the community, because most students who participate in the adjustment program come from a very limited economic environment; this is also one of the reasons why their school age is so late.

Although SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah are part of PKBM, it is undeniable that both do have different characteristics from PKBM in general. Many students join PKBM to get a diploma, because with a diploma they can get a better job than before, but there are also students who take part in PKBM for the benefit of continuing their studies. There are also those who follow learning activities at PKBM because they live in very remote areas, so formal schools are not found around where they live. There are even those who take part in the PKBM package C program, so that with a diploma owned by someone can extend their retirement age as staff at the village government office (interview with PKBM Chairman Ibnu Hajar, Dayat, Magelang, August 3, 2023).

From the various descriptions above, it is clear that SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah have various differences and uniqueness compared to PKBM which is widely practiced in the community. In the two alternative education institutions studied, most of the students are still in the normal age category of school, while in PKBM mostly, the age level of students is much older. Despite the various differences in characteristics, the government continues to provide support to citizens, so that they have better reading, writing, arithmetic, life skills, knowledge and reasoning skills, so this may be one of the reasons why PKBM is institutionalized until now.

## Analysis

From the description and arguments presented above, it appears that both SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah are two alternative educational institutions that have their own unique strengths. Both were originally formed to meet the needs of people who relatively did not have the ability to access formal education, but with time and the growing recognition and popularity of these two alternative educational institutions are increasingly in demand by the public. The levels of education - early childhood education (PAUD), elementary school (SD), junior high school (SMP), and high school (SMA) - are formed in accordance with the demands of the needs contained in the community. In addition, the two alternative educational institutions, from the beginning of their presence, appeared with a spirit of independence, trying to meet all needs with their own

abilities. Along with the dynamics and the passage of time, the two institutions adjust themselves in various aspects. The presence of community-based alternative education is different from formal schools, which generally only transfer knowledge with few skills (to say none), but do not have an empowering, humanizing, and problem-solving oriented agenda. Therefore, the two alternative educational institutions, SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah, in every realization of their various learning activities at each level of education, have differences with others, such as asking for parental commitment and responsibility in every stage of learning. In SALAM this is manifested in the form of parental participation, parents being required to be involved in the learning process. For example, in choosing themes and carrying out research activities, so that parents are not enough just to finance, but also get involved in various stages in each research process, such as choosing research topics, collecting data, to presenting research.

In Qoryah Thayybah, parental participation is practiced among others in holding every month meetings with the school, so that children's learning development is monitored. While in formal schools, in general, parental involvement is only in terms of financial donations. In PKBM in general, because someone only follows the package C equivalency program, so for them getting a diploma is the most important goal, and the learning process that takes place in PKBM generally only follows the subjects that will be tested in the equalization exam.

The two community-based alternative schools studied in this paper are unique in utilizing learning resources. For SALAM the internet is indeed a learning resource that can enrich, but still, the internet, to borrow Wahya's words (interview with the founder of Alternative Education SALAM, July 24, 2023), and Yudistira (interview with Principal of Alternative Education SALAM, July 24, 2023) will educate instant culture, while what is emphasized in SALAM is precisely the learning process that departs from direct experience. In the process of learning, instant attitudes, as much as possible should be avoided, while if we use the internet, everything just clicks, and information and explanations can be obtained instantly.

On the other hand, students at Qoryah Thayybah consider the internet as an important learning resource, which can be asked about various things at any time, so many students use it to learn various things, such as: computer programs, foreign languages, vocal processing, networking via e-mail, surfing for new sources of knowledge using e-libraries, etc. In short, the students at Qoryah Thayybah learn a lot of new things by themselves, therefore even though they are in villages, many of the students have various achievements, including foreign languages.

Their freedom to use various facilities in the educational institution causes them to feel at home, so it can be understood that "for them, school is home, library room, kitchen,

yard to the natural environment of the village where they live"<sup>5</sup>. While in SALAM free internet access is not available, the need for internet fulfillment is the responsibility of each student, or individual. The difference in views between the two alternative educational institutions in terms of internet use in the end deserves to be explored more deeply.

What is also interesting is that the two educational institutions above use learning methods that are based on student needs (student learning), by utilizing a research approach on objects or subjects that really want to be studied, so it is not surprising that when researchers make direct observations in the field, students seem busy doing the activities they want, both individually and in groups. Researchers very rarely find the preoccupation of students with their gadgets, except when needed.

## Recommendations

The interest in community-based alternative education, both SALAM and Qoryah Thayybah, which are members of PKBM, has recently been getting bigger, because on the one hand such alternative education provides greater space for freedom, flexibility and independence for students to gain the skills and knowledge needed for their future than formal schools or PKBM, which are just running the government curriculum to obtain an adjustment diploma at the package C level, while on the other hand the increasing recognition and popularity of alternative education, as described above, causes public interest to study at these educational institutions to be higher, thus potentially causing conflicts in the recruitment process carried out in the future. Similar tensions will continue to arise if they do not get a satisfactory solution. Moreover, the backgrounds of students studying in this alternative institution do not all come from the lower class, workers, and farmers, but the upper middle class.

The increasing public interest in learning in the two alternative educational institutions certainly cannot be separated from the use of appropriate learning methods for the development of the learning process that takes place in students. In this context, it is research-based learning by not forgetting the involvement of parents, facilitators, SALAM community experiences, and the internet as sources of learning additional information.

With the various advantages possessed by these two community-based alternative education institutions, in the future they could be a model of approach and development of education and could become a national trend in Indonesia.

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.kbqt.org/2019/10/ketika-sekolah-semakin-mahal-dan.html>, accessed 7, 8, 2023.

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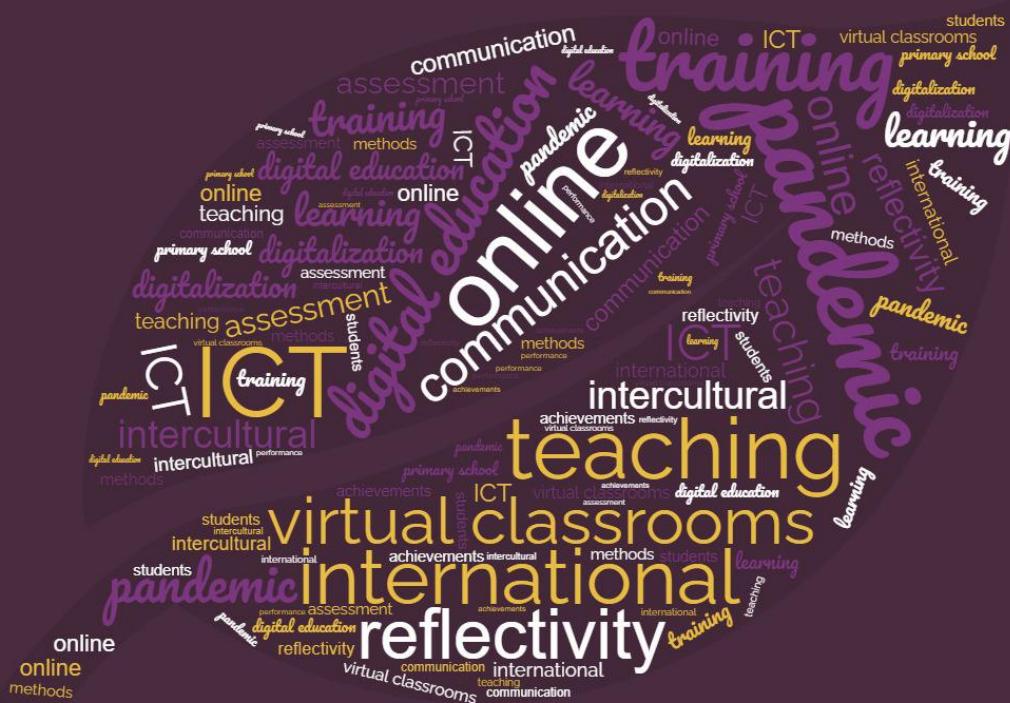
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